

MODESTA

OTHER BOOKS BY
G. B. STERN

DEBATABLE GROUND—THE BACK SEAT

THE CHINA SHOP—BOUQUET

THUNDERSTORM—THE MATRIARCH

A DEPUTY WAS KING

THE DARK GENTLEMAN—DEBONAIR

THE SLOWER JUDAS

THE ROOM—SMOKE RINGS

MODESTA



BY
G. B. STERN



1929

ALFRED · A · KNOPF · NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT 1929 BY G. B. STERN

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO
REPRODUCE THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF
IN ANY FORM

*First and Second Printings
before Publication
Published August, 1929*

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

PART ONE

CHAPTER I

(1)

“SIGNORA!”

Althea Rice stopped at the imperative call from the door of the wine-shop. She murmured to Laurence Ferrier: “That’s the father of Rosina, Modesta and Lisa.”

They stood waiting in the hot drench of noon, at the foot of the mule-track which climbed up to their villa on the hill, while Borello hastened towards them, his purposeful spirit only partly concealed by his unsteady paces.

“*Signora!*” planting himself between Althea and her guest; “my three daughters, are they virtuous?”

“Your three daughters, Borello,” she replied in Italian, “are exceedingly virtuous. Especially Rosina.”

Borello took this in slowly; then he nodded, satisfied on his first point. “And my three daughters,” he persisted, “do they work hard? Are they serious? Are they honest? Do they give pleasure to the *signora?*”

Althea felt hypnotised to continue her replies in

the same formal chant. "Your three daughters, Borello, they are gold, they are jewels, they are treasures." And she added, as before: "Especially Rosina."

Laurence Ferrier listened, concealing, for manners' sake, a broad grin of amusement. He understood enough Italian not to be merely impatient with these typical dialogues which flowed like cascades, instead of dripping reluctantly from a turned-off tap, as is the way of the English peasant.

His hostess now turned towards the mule-track again. It was cooler than standing here parleying with Borello under the taut blue fabric of the sky, for the sun would have to strike first through the olive trees which laced above it in a mist of silvery foliage and tiny white star-blossom.

But Borello was a determined man, and he had not yet finished his catechism. It was all pre-arranged to lead by circular routes towards a central enigma in his brain. Only the enigma had wandered away from the centre, and Heaven alone could tell where it was now. Yet he continued the pursuit:

"Then you would say, *signora*"—lurching slightly—"that you who are, forgive me, without children, and who shall blame you, find the same pleasure in my Rosina and my Modesta and my Lisa as though they were truly daughters of your own?"

"Oh, God!" said Althea, in English, "I do so want an iced drink!"

"*Scusi, signora?*"

"Cut it short, then," Laurie advised her. He, too, was growing a little bored with the richness of Borello's breathing and the purity of his sentiments. And that noonday trudge up from the sea after bathing, during an Italian June, was a strain even to an athlete.

At the foot of the mule-track the road looped down to Santa Nucia; and beyond the road ran the single railway line; and here, too, were the level crossing, and a wine and provision shop, and the forge. So that it was a lively social corner. Borello's friends from the forge, and the owner of the shop with many of her children and dogs and cocks and hens, and the man who worked the gates at the *livello*, all gathered round courteously, to hear what the English *signora* had to say about her serving-maids, Rosina, Modesta and Lisa.

Althea replied warmly: "I do indeed look upon Rosina as though she were my daughter."

A formidable truculence gathered across Borello's brow. "*Ma! Dio! Corpo di Bacco!* Do you not look upon Modesta as your daughter, then? Or upon Lisa as your daughter? Why?"

Laurie asked in English: "D'you want me to knock the fellow down? He's got no right to swear at you!"

"No, don't bother, Laurie. The body of Bacchus is a pure formality." Althea smiled winningly upon Borello and his bodyguard of interested colleagues from the forge and the wine-shop. A charming donkey had by now joined the group, with two enormous wicker demijohns balanced one on either side of its back. She smiled first at Borello, and then, more tenderly, into the soft pink and grizzled face of the donkey. "Lisa," she said, "though she is only twelve years old and without polish, is a very hard worker. She is strong, too, and willing. I have a deep respect for Lisa."

Borello with a curse brought down his fist upon the palm of his outstretched hand. "*Ecco!*" he shouted; "I knew it! There was a wicked one last evening, down at the *Clubino*, who told me that Modesta, my second daughter, was a *bagagia*. I killed him, I, as I will kill many others!" His eye glared fiercely around him, defying any suggestion that he might be exaggerating. "But Modesta, she will dance no more at the *Clubino*. No, nor at any *festa!*" He heaped up a few wine-shot oaths on top of this resolution. "It is not the first time that I, Borello Armando, have had to teach my daughters with my boots!" And he tried now to take off both his boots in preparation while still standing.

Althea Rice thought that perhaps the moment had come for her to use her most gracious and pacifying influence upon the savage parent. "Borello," she began, in a voice that somehow reminded Laurie of buttercups; "can you remember when you were young, when you were only seventeen, like your little Modesta? You, too, loved to be happy and to dance!"

"My parents made me work when I was seven, *signora!* I had very little to eat, and they hated me, and I them. So you see it is not the same. For I, I love my daughters. When I was seventeen and of an age to marry," he continued, beckoning a closer circle to hear his narrative and to witness his blended heroism and common-sense, "I went home and fought my father, and for six hours he lay senseless on the pavement. And now he and the *madre* are both dead."

"Well, and weren't you sorry for your anger, when you heard that they were dead?"

"I?" cried Borello. "I laughed!" And he spat upon the road. The circle bulged outwards. "And now," cried Borello, gaily, as though memory had heartened him to take a more sunshiny view of life, "now I will go up the hill to embrace my daughters, because they are virtuous and serious. *A rivederci, signora, e buon appetito!*" He swept a bow to Althea, and marched up the wide bend of the road.

(2)

Althea and Laurence, glad of their release, took the short cut by the steep track under the olive trees. The donkey, encouraged upward by a variety of strange musical cries from its owner, clopped on the cobbles behind them, its load of demijohns swaying in and out of the patches of scissored light and tender shade.

Laurence Ferrier was glad that he had halted here, a month ago, at Santa Nucia. Like Lars Porsena of Clusium, he was on his way to Rome. Indeed, in temperament he was not unlike Lars Porsena, one of the few characters in literature who had made an impression upon his youthful mind. Samson Agonistes, who solved problems by pulling down the pillars because he felt thus inclined, was the other. Perhaps with this tendency in view, or perhaps in spite of it, his mother had ambitiously decided for him, on leaving Oxford, that he was to become an architect on a massive scale. He had studied architecture for over a year now, and was showing signs of restlessness. So Belmont Ferrier suggested that they should together visit Rome, that he might see for himself what mighty things could be accomplished with bricks . . . tiny oblong bricks deeply soaked in the warm glow

ing sunshine that had flowed over them for over two thousand years, so that they had absorbed the very hue of amber and honey.

✓ But Laurie had not wanted to travel with his mother, nor enjoy all the seeming advantages of being seen about with a beautiful woman, without any of the pleasures of feeling protective. He experienced a strong reaction from his existence as Belmont Ferrier's devoted only son, to whom was granted every reasonable wish. So he rejected the offer of a trip to Rome, denouncing it as boring, an insidious attempt to force ancient history and classic architecture down a young man's throat when he was joyously rid of these schoolboy pests. He stayed at home during a couple of months' increasing longing to be off. Then, dreading another offer of Belmont's companionship, he simply walked out of the flat, one day, without saying good-bye, and crossed over to Paris, where he confided his mood, in a bad-tempered outburst which relieved him mightily, to Nicholas Lepuy.

"Go where you want to, and stay as long as you like," Nick counselled him. "Why not?"

Suddenly Laurie burst out laughing. "I want to go to Rome," he confessed.

But he got no further than Santa Nucia, where he had intended only to spend two or three days at the villa of his friend, Alan Rice. But to lave his hot

limbs in the lazy Mediterranean, clear green, clear gold. . . . How could Rome compete? He stayed on and on . . .

“Althea, would you mind if I never go? I’m mad about Santa Nucia. I’m in love with it!”

(3)

And by now they were at the top of the stony track, and there was Althea’s house and garden, terraces climbing up and up behind it towards the olive groves clouding the near hills. Beyond, in a semi-circle, were ranged the bare bruise-coloured mountains. The house itself was painted an innocent lemon yellow; and a little to one side of it, next to a clump of flowering blue, stood a stone washing-tank under a trellis-work covered with vines. Three girls were busy around the tank; and they were singing in a chorus of thin shrill voices some tune with a refrain that sounded so old and yet so simple, as though it were twisted like a young olive-branch from the grey old legends of that Ligurian coast in the fearless times before the ships of the Saracen rowed in.

At the sound of this childish singing, Laurence frowned and looked anxiously down the road for any signs of Borello in vengeful or affectionate mood; Borello with embraces or boots?

"I say, Althea, look here. These kids, you know. At least, two of them are kids. That drunken ass isn't going to hurt them, is he? They're such nice kids."

"I can't help it if he is." Althea was sleepy from her bath, and her subsequent emotional scene with an Italian father. "He's their Daddy, and Daddies have enormous rights out here. No good interfering."

"I'm going to interfere, if I hear him knocking them about!"

"You're looking so like a heavy-weight boxing Blue!" She dropped, exhausted, into a deck chair. They had reached the loggia at last, and she called to her husband to prepare something that would clink in a tall glass pitcher. . . . "With strawberries floating in it," she added. "And, darling, tell Rosina that we're in and ready for lunch. She's up at the wash-tank."

"And tell Modesta to go and hide," added Ferrier. "Modesta is the middle one, isn't she, Althea? And the prettiest? The child who waits at table?"

Rice nodded. "The one who never does any work. Yes, that's right. Why should she hide?"

"Because her father's a bully, and he's coming up to thrash her!" Privately, Ferrier was young enough to resent the imperturbability of his host and hostess anent Modesta's fate.

He was not aware, until this last half-hour, how

Modesta had become associated with the indolent golden spell by which Italy had captured a man whose holidays and whose vital enjoyments had hitherto been almost entirely athletic. Ferrier had excelled at games, and had never imagined a pleasure more passive than such excelling. He sailed on the sea, or swam in it; he sculled or punted or canoed upon the river. And this was the beginning and end of water. In a field, he played cricket; and across country, golf. As for mountains, you climbed them—first up and then down. And in all these instances of hitting it off well with Nature, you excelled wherever you could. Yet here in Santa Nucia the summer was too hot to care about excelling in anything; you were as content to be the last as the first; but there was no last, because there was no rivalry. While he was in the sea, he lay contentedly upon the warm ripples, and did not bother to swim. When he reposed afterwards in the shadow of the loggia, he was content to listen to the twang of the myriad crickets, and the thick whirr past his ear of an unknown flying insect with vermilion belly; or to look up at the little hill villages, white and rose and almond, glad that there was no need to stride up steep tracks and explore them. He marvelled at the energy of the swallow-tails, parasols blown inside out, chasing each other above the brilliant tiers of snap-dragon in the sun. For the first time in his life, lan-

guor had bewitched him. It was like falling asleep to the sound of poetry read aloud, until the words lost all sense in drowsiness.

Modesta, who came and went with her light patter of steps against this background of glowing barbarian ease, Modesta was not only a serving-maid, as she would have been, born into the same circumstances in England. In England, Modesta at seventeen would have had a raw and scrubbed look, bright red cheeks, and, no doubt, honest eyes; no doubt, also, adenoids and hard breathing; she would have meant well, and broken a lot; and she would have worn a cap and print dress, and Laurie would have taken no notice of her. But out here there were no caps and aprons and print dresses, no uniform of any sort. Modesta was simply one of the three daughters of the wicked Borello, and that in itself was the beginning of a fairy-tale. Seen in profile, her small face might have been copied from an Egyptian coin. The straight nose, the ironic little mouth, the square-cut black hair. Her skin was an even, clear brown which never deepened or paled, and her voice . . . her voice was the most distinctive part of her . . . soft and so respectful; yet all the while, in a slight exaggeration of its respect, you could hear a hint of mockery—the mockery of a very ancient race that disdained service, before it learnt the well-being that might result from expedi-

ence rather than rebellion. When she spoke, which was rarely, she picked her words as fastidiously as a pigeon picking grain. . . .

And suddenly, while Laurie was thinking of her, she appeared on the loggia with glasses and lemons and ice and several bottles, and the young Englishman shifted from dream to actual contemplation. But there was very little difference. Here was Modesta in the short dark silk frock patterned in damson, which she had copied from one of Althea's, and which she wore with a quaint air resembling as far as possible Althea herself, tall, fair, gracious. . . .

"Modesta, your father is on his way up here."

"*Si, signora?*" Modesta was politely bored. Laurie surmised that in luckier circumstances she would have said: "Not at home."

"But it is nearly the hour for *collazione*, so I do not wish you to rush away up in the olives with the dogs, and leave any trouble for Rosina to bear."

"No, no, *signora!*" Modesta's voice held an inflection of shocked amazement that she should be suspected of such behaviour.

"You've done it before, Modesta!"

"How well the *signora* looks with her scarf draped *cosi*," swiftly, without a pause from Modesta. "It is *molto alla moda*, very much in the fashion to-day, to wear the scarf so." She turned towards Laurie,

with a confident gesture enlisting his sympathy—and yet this was the first time that he could remember her addressing him otherwise than obliquely or with a demure good-morning.

“Signor Lorenzo, am I not right? The *signora*, does she not look even younger with her scarf worn in these folds?”

Althea laughed, and dismissed her to the kitchen.

“She’s a born Machiavelli, that child,” grunted Rice, busy among lemons and bottles. “And she’ll come to a bad end. Look at Althea being pleased with her compliment! ‘Does not the *signora* look even younger?’ ” he mimicked.

Althea protested. “I wasn’t pleased at the compliment. Don’t I know Modesta by now? I was pleased that she should have noticed that I’d draped this scarf differently from the last time she saw me wearing it; because it’s a very small difference. You didn’t notice it, Alan.”

“I don’t have to, my beautiful. I don’t have to save myself all day long by the skin of my teeth from having to work, like that young slut. I *do* work.”

Laurence murmured that they were hard on Modesta. “Surely I’ve seen her flitting about and getting through quite a lot?”

Alan grinned. “You haven’t got it quite right, my lad. She flits about and goes through the motions of

work, and Rosina does the rest. So does Lisa, who's a plain young woman and doesn't mind a spot of exertion every now and then."

"You're ungrateful, Alan. Remember Modesta and your medicine."

Alan remembered. It had been an inspiration, during that period of his convalescence after pneumonia, to hand over to Modesta the responsibility of aiding his cure, three times a day after food. Never once did she forget it, nor forget to order another bottle in time, so that not a dose need be missed. . . . "I regret, but here is the medicine of *il signore!*"—carefully measured out. "Oh, damn! I'm sick of the rotten stuff!" . . . Modesta watched him with grave compassion while he drank it. "Is it nasty, *signore?*" . . .

"Yes, she's certainly got a talent for direct personal service. She spends hours every day among Althea's clothes, and they look at fashion-books together, cheek by cheek!"

Althea smiled, but did not contradict. "She wants a gold dress, and a silver dress."

"Who? *Modesta?*"

"She's seen me wearing my gold tissue." And Althea related how Modesta had caught her breath at first sight of the new evening dress, brought straight from Paris. With clasped hands: "O *signora*, but it is securely the most beautiful and the most expensive

dress in the world!" And Althea, amused, had shown her a severe tailored black coat and skirt. "This costs more, Modesta!" Modesta looked stubborn and unbelieving. "O no, *signora!*" positively. Then Althea told her the prices of both, and Modesta pronounced grave judgment. "For the gold dress, *signora*, you have paid certainly enough, but it is right that you should have paid just that price and no more. For the other—forgive me, *signora*—you have paid too much!" . . . But lately the little Machiavelli, currying favour, and thinking she knew the hearts of women, had apparently become rather too crude in her diplomacy. She told Althea that she looked indeed far younger than the Signorina Joan, who had gone off in looks since last year, and was now almost plain—that is, compared with *la signora*. She had also, it transpired later, told la Signorina Joan that la Signorina Katerina, also staying in the house, was looking so much older than last year, and not beautiful any more. . . . No, not at all beautiful; it was a pity that she wore her hair *così*, and that green did not suit her. . . . And thus Modesta tripped from one guest to another, like the serving-wench in old-fashioned comedy, having heard that there is no truer way to the hearts of women than by disparaging other women to their friends. And thus she hoped for a rich reaping of presents and petting. It had not occurred

to Modesta that the English ladies sometimes compared notes, or that, having compared notes, they should actually be amused at the revelations!

Alan Rice said, trying his own concoction: "Damn! I've forgotten the sugar. Where is it?" He searched the tray, and called, rather testily, for Modesta. But Rosina appeared, trustiest of the three sisters; Rosina, from whom exquisite manners sprang not from diplomacy and subtle planning, nor from imitation, but because she was perfectly simple and perfectly faithful and perfectly intelligent. Moreover, without any emotional displays of her nation, she cared for her *signori*, and proved it by strenuous deeds. She cooked, and did the careful marketing, and kept the accounts, and superintended all the work of Modesta and Lisa, and polished the cream and red-tiled floors until they shone; the daily washing of clothes and linen was her responsibility; and she gathered in the vegetables from the garden, and helped with the dogs, and coped with every crisis, from unwanted visitors to the bottling of the new wine. Rosina had the face of a Madonna—not the fair, martyred type that is resigned to all sorrows but does not do very much to alleviate them; but the Madonna face of the noblest peasants of the South; those who for hundreds of years have carried their burdens, hard work and many children and the ways of men, and learnt how to deal prac-

tically with such burdens. Only in her voice, which was exactly like Modesta's, was there a hint of mockery at the whole laborious, patient, endless procession in which she took part. She was of much bigger and heavier build than Modesta, and clothes did not interest her to the same extent—except fur, in which she showed her kinship with the maidens of London factories. You could arouse any ecstasy in Rosina by presenting her with a bit of rabbit, cured and lined—especially if it were an English rabbit.

“*Il signore* desires——?”

“Where's Modesta?”

“My father is here,” explained Rosina, with unfilial sadness. “He has come to drink a glass of wine with us.”

“And Modesta?”

“We did not know if *il babbo* was going to be angry or pleased. It happens that he is pleased. He has embraced me many times, and *la Lisa* also. But Modesta did not know that.”

“Bunked, I suppose? Yes, there she goes!” Rice pointed out a small quick figure in a damson frock running across a clear space between the end of the garden and the olives. “I won't have it, *Althea*, straight after we've forbidden her. Send *Lisa* to fetch her back!”

Rosina remarked, hoping to avert the master's dis-

pleasure: "Lunch is ready, *signora*, and it is a good lunch to-day. I have made *ravioli*."

"But, Rosina, who will wait at lunch?" Althea's voice was gently reproving. "La Lisa is so clumsy, and, as you see, we have visitors——"

"Oh, look here, Althea, don't draw me into this! Let the kid go!" exclaimed Laurie, aghast at being the excuse for hauling back the escaping Iphigenia to the axe of her father.

Simultaneously, Rosina offered to wait at table herself.

"No." Althea, who had a kind heart, but strict notions as to how a house should be run, was suddenly quite adamant. "You've enough to do, Rosina, cooking and dishing up, and only this morning I saw you cleaning the shoes the way the *signore* likes them done, and that is Modesta's work. You should not do it for her."

Rosina shrugged her shoulders. "*Il signore* recognizes that Modesta is not practical for the boots."

"I should think not! The hussy, she slabs on half the tin of polish, stands dreaming for a moment, then sits down and slowly lets the boot fall from her hand to the ground. Then she does the same with the other. I've watched her."

"*Si, signore*," Rosina agreed. "But it is not easy to teach her, la Modesta. It is easier to clean them

myself." She was chattering to gain time for the errant little sister. But Laurence, not understanding this, saw in her yet another bully, tyrant and persecutor. "Modesta hopes to become a *signora*. She has said so to me many times!"

"Well, she can't become a *signora* to-day, anyhow. Send Lisa to fetch her to wait at table as usual. And bring me some sugar. And if her father thrashes her"—as Rosina withdrew—"it'll do her all the good in the world. I'd like to hear her squeal!" he added, with relish.

"Oh, come, Alan, you're not as bad as that!"

"Not quite as bad," Alan Rice agreed. "But she does make me angry about my shoes."

"Good heavens," thought Laurie, who was by now a white-hot furnace of chivalry. "His blasted shoes! And for those he'd sacrifice that lovely, sensitive little creature."

They saw Lisa jogging up the garden at a healthy trot, a big clumsy girl of twelve, with a loud shy voice—not in the least like the lovely, sensitive little creature who had awakened Laurie's sense of protection. The sugar was brought, and they quenched their thirst in silence. . . .

"She wants to be a *signora*. She wants a gold dress and a silver dress!" Laurie thought that he had never heard anything quite so touching.

(4)

They went into the cool stone dining-room for lunch. The *antipasta* was already on the table, so they helped themselves: Plates of sardines and anchovies, arranged with a sprinkling of garden flowers on small dishes, and wrinkled black olives, and cold *fungi*, and *salami* without garlic. Presently, Borello's voice arose from the kitchen, which was up two steps and through a door set in an archway. The voice arose in a lusty but incomprehensible roar.

"Dialect," remarked Alan.

Amid the bellowings could be distinguished only one word: "*Bagagia*."

A girl screamed. Laurie sprang to his feet, but Althea, with a serene smile, told him to sit down again.

"Aren't you going to interfere?" he demanded.

"My dear Laurie, one can't. Not out here. They're so temperamental."

"Is that what you call it? Sounds like blue murder!"

"My dear boy, it isn't blue murder or anything like it. Italian fathers adore their children."

"Even when they're drunk?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Mind you, they're very upset

if we fail to take an interest in their domestic affairs, but it should be after the battle, not while it's still going on." She seemed to Laurie to become more and more serene every moment. Serene was too mild and flowing a word. Callous! Althea Rice was callous!

"It won't hurt Modesta. Without exaggeration, she really has been treating herself lately as though she were something extra precious. You should see Alan's shoes when she's left to clean them."

"Oh, God," thought Laurie, with an inward groan. "Those shoes again! Who cares about Alan's shoes?" It was dreadful that his host and hostess should have this obsession about shoes, and carry it to such lengths that they would not take any action whatsoever while a frail infant was being murdered in their own kitchen!

At that moment the frail infant herself appeared to remove the plates, prior to the heralded dish of *ravioli*. Laurence, who had acquired from his American mother a tinge of super-reverence and protection towards all women, whatever their class, could hardly bear to remain seated, now that he had suddenly become conscious of Modesta while she waited upon him. He did not wish to confuse her by looking at her. At last, on his sidelong inspection, she revealed herself as demure, as staid as usual, the same little air of secret scorn curving her downcast eyelids. So far

as it went, this was a disappointment, but he suspected that her soul was weeping. . . .

“Don’t make any remarks about what’s going on, in front of this young woman,” Alan Rice warned him. “She understands a lot of English, though she pretends not to. She understands what I’m saying now, I bet you anything. . . . Don’t you, you sly little demon?” he continued, in exactly the same monotone.

Modesta took no notice. She might have been a small carven image of a young girl, instead of the flesh-and-blood counterpart, so inscrutable did she remain, so far removed from human guile or suspicion. Again and again, it seemed, her master and mistress wronged her!

“Modesta!”

“*Si, signore?*”

“*Capisce Inglese?*”

“No, no, *signore*,” suavely, with a touch of horror at the suggestion that she should presume to understand a language not meant for her ears. And Modesta stepped daintily into the kitchen.

“I’ve caught her out at it once or twice, accidentally. Said that I wanted something done, in English, and she did it involuntarily, before I had time to translate.”

"I expect your gestures explained it," argued Laurie, gruffly.

"What sort of a chimpanzee do you take me for? I don't make gestures!"

"It would be much more natural, if she really understood English, that she should let you know and be proud of it. What's to be gained by hushing it up?"

It was Althea who replied. "Modesta is entirely feminine. She believes in flattery, and she believes in secret knowledge. She believes that they lead to great power and riches."

Laurie glared at her. "Poor little Modesta!" he muttered.

Althea's maddeningly complacent voice went on: "Yes, she's a nice affectionate child, really. Listen, that's Borello!"

There was a sound of falling china, and of a tray being dropped in the kitchen beyond the archway. Doubtless this was Borello's farewell, for a moment later his head and shoulders passed the window that looked eastward from the dining-room. Laurie remarked with surprise that, seen in silent silhouette, and without the ludicrous additions of his clothes and his temper, he was not unbeautiful. He was, indeed, very like his second daughter, the *bagagia*, with the same stamp upon him of a remote race of stern, controlled, brown-faced people with straight, square

features, low brows, and lips sardonically curved; a small, quick, supple race who mocked at giants.

"What does Borello do?" he asked, surprised at this sudden interest tugged forth in him by the obvious villain of the domestic hearth.

He was told that Borello was a builder of walls; that those fawn and grey and pinky stones that propped up the shores of Italy from the coast to the hilltops, that held up the artichokes and broad beans, vines and olives—that every one of these stones in every one of these walls was cunningly laid by hand; and Borello had inherited the trick of it. He was proficient, too, in the lore of wells and their sources, rising water and falling water, springs and streams and their damming. . . . "Walls and wells, these are my mysteries!" said Borello, and not humbly. "*Io*, *I*!" said Borello, thumping himself upon the chest; "*Io!*" And then in a vehement waterfall of language argued with his employers, argued with the experts. . . . "*I*" and "*I*" and "*Io*" and "*I*." But he was strangely often right—more often than was good for his "*Io*." . . . "He's got a superiority complex," finished Alan Rice. "They're very rare, nowadays. It's all the other kind usually."

But Laurie had long ago ceased to listen. His interest for Borello had died down. It was only that dis-

concerting flash of resemblance to Modesta that had so moved him as the man passed the window.

CHAPTER II

(1)

AFTER lunch, Althea and Alan retired for a siesta, and Laurence said he would go for a walk. When they warned him that the sun was hot, he replied, like most English people during their first weeks of Italy in the summer, that he liked sun, that he didn't get enough of it, that it never hurt him because his hair was so thick. Ten minutes later, his hair not having proved thick enough, after all, he stole back to the lemon-coloured house, where all the windows were open and the dark green jalousies closed. The dining-room had been cleared of lunch; it invited him like a cave into its dim coolness. The dining-room was the oldest part of the house, and Laurence heartily blessed its walls, three feet thick, its vaulted ceiling, tiled floor and gracious archways that were shaped to hold quietness as water in a bowl. Laurence flung himself into an armchair, and lay there, supine, glad to be quit of all that beating colour that blazed outside. He could just hear a thin thread of song from the kitchen. . . . Perhaps it was Modesta, he mused, drowsily, Modesta

sitting there alone and thinking of gold and silver dresses. . . .

Suddenly, he was aroused with a start by the terrible clash and jangle of a quarrel. It sounded as though a hundred female voices had abruptly broken tether, and were being swirled round and round, pent within a space too small for emotion; savage, screaming voices, freed of all control . . . and more particularly one voice that harshly scrambled up on top of the others. Laurence had sprung upright. Was Modesta in there? Were they hurting Modesta?

Then an outer door banged, and the clamour ebbed and sank once more into peace.

Laurence strode out on to the loggia, and looked up towards the olives on the rim of the hill. Somehow, he had already known that he would see Modesta rushing along, rushing away from the house. He followed her, but lost sight of her, and then found her again, in a small thicket beside a well with dank tumbling walls, from whose crevices sprang a fig tree, its stem contorted into the shapes of a dead silver snake. A wild-rose bush in vivid bloom entangled with the fig tree, dappling it with gold and red. And in the shade under the flat leaves of a nespoli, Modesta lay prone—prone, but not sobbing, as he had expected; but lying rigid, face downward, her thin body shaken with sorrow, perhaps with fear, perhaps with some

mysterious conflict more puzzling than a child's loud crying would have been.

Although Laurence Ferrier had lived a manly life in the orthodox sense of manliness, ever since he was born twenty-three years ago, never until now, as he lifted Modesta into his arms, had he been able to use up the full store of manliness at his disposal. Perhaps he was over-excited by having left behind him for the first time a country where restraint was everything, where the sun was mild and the sky decorously clouded. He was a beaker filled with a heady new vintage.

And when he whispered in halting Italian: "Modesta, tell me who has been unkind to you," he felt enormously burly, tremendously chivalrous, and not in the least foolish.

"It is my sisters," Modesta whispered back, as though someone were listening and disapproving. "They hate me, my sisters, and my father hates me, and *i signori*, they all hate me, but my sisters most!" And she wished them what sounded to him like an accident, but which, had he known it, was not a pretty oath from little Modesta at seventeen.

"Was that Rosina screaming at you?" He frowned heavily, his arms tightened. Modesta became less rigid, she smiled faintly, and turned her face towards him.

"Rosina says I do not work, that I neglect to wipe

the inside rim of the dishes, and that I do not clean the *signore's* boots with enough care. I thought perhaps"—she went on, limpidly—"that the Signor Lorenzo had been complaining, and that is why I ran out, because I was so sorry, I. I could not bear more."

"I, complain? I, about you? About boots?" cried Laurie, thunderous against Modesta's implications. "Good God! Do you think I *want* you to clean my shoes? They weren't my shoes at all that all the fuss was about; and anyhow, shoes——" He stopped dead, throttling his rage, because he did not want to go on talking about shoes for ever, here with Modesta in his arms.

"I do not like work," she said, confiding in him, sure of sympathy, as though they were two truants from a wearisome universe that existed only for toil.

"They tell me that you want to be a *signora*, Modesta."

And she nodded emphatically, while her small face grew arrogant at the dream. . . .

Laurence had determined to marry her. His mind moved like that, without much bother, in large chunks. He would marry Modesta, because she aroused more protective desires in him than he had conceived possible in the cheery, conventional state of society which had hitherto surrounded him. His mother had talked to him of chivalry, of devotion to ideals, of romantic

sacrifice . . . and now the words were swelled out and afloat like large brightly-tinted balloons. Moreover, he was in a state of defiance as well as glorious intoxication. Damn Alan Rice and his callous all-British attitude which could not note the difference between a servant and someone who, exquisite and fine as Modesta, has yet by some miracle been dropped into the kitchen of his villa for a spell. And Althea, too, with her serenity and her insistence on housewifely order—— Damn Althea! Althea was of the nature that cooed when given a slave! And as for Borello, and as for Rosina, damning was too good for them. Nobody but himself appreciated his little love, his little Egyptian. Laurie's cheek was pressed up against hers, while she pretended to watch a flight of two bright butterflies, one saffron, one blue and crimson, over the myrtle-scrub in the hot wilderness beyond their oasis.

“Shall I take you away from all this, Modesta? Will you come if I promise to take care of you? If I promise to make you a *signora*?”

Modesta did not answer at once. She was astonished at the speed of Lorenzo's wooing, but that there would be a wooing of some sort she had not doubted; not since she had surprised him looking at her in worship, on the loggia, two hours ago, when she appealed to him about the droop of a scarf. . . . But what did

he mean—"make you a *signora*"? Was this a short cut to the top of the hill she sought to climb? Or else a short cut, and even steeper, to the bottom? He was very handsome, thought Modesta, though it was a pity indeed that his hair was not golden, but red, and that his nose was big. But he had a kind face, and blue eyes, and she liked his clothes. . . . Modesta became absorbed in the problem of why her own countrymen, even when they dressed in what they called "ingliss style," did not look as chic as Signor Lorenzo?

"Do you ever wear 'le check'?" she asked him, guilelessly.

Laurie was startled. He had awaited at least a few faltering words of love. She explained that "le check" was "ingliss style," and he replied, tenderly, that no, "le check" was not included in his wardrobe, but if Modesta cared for it he would buy himself a check suit, and for her a gold dress, perhaps, or a silver one.

Modesta's little brown stubborn face blazed into a heavenly glory. Laurie thought how queer it was that he should so ache with her beauty, when she was not tall or swaying in her walk, and had neither the complexion of a peach nor hair of spun gold—all of which had seemed to him essential matters once, and so trivial now. Modesta, cut to that severe and yet sturdy suggestion of a legend of bulrushes slicing a

frieze of hard blue sky, was she a child in a cradle among the bulrushes, or was she Pharaoh's daughter?

. . .

"*Il mio babbo*," began Modesta, as who might have said: "speaking of Pharaoh!"—"*Il mio babbo* would be angry if he knew that we were lying here, I and the English *signore*, idle on a busy afternoon." She spoke mournfully, but remained quiescent. In fact, she cuddled closer to Laurie, until she could feel the thumping of his heart. "*Il mio babbo*——"

"I'll take you to my mother instead, Modesta. And she will love you, and you shall sit on cushions, and others will wash your clothes, and I will put on your pretty kid shoes for you."

Modesta understood easily enough the part about cushions and shoes, both familiar objects well within her range, but she needed to be enlightened on the stark insanity which suggested taking her to his mother. "*Ma!*" thought Modesta. And "*E curioso!*" thought Modesta. Her lids drooped heavily while she mused. And he kissed them.

"Your mother, Signor Lorenzo, where does she live?"

"In London."

"And is she very old?"

Laurence smiled and shook his head. In spite of their recent quarrel and of his bad behaviour in

breaking loose from her enveloping draperies, he felt no qualms in proffering his mother's sanction of this act of his, buoyantly sure that she would approve of succour to the weak and childish and oppressed. His mother had often told him to perform such deeds, but he had no notion that they would be so pleasant in performance, so like chucking about gold purses and seeing everyone the jollier for them. . . .

For Modesta's sake he needed his mother at this crisis. So he would have to go back, that was all, and say he was sorry. Perhaps he had been rather churlish over Rome.

"No, you funny baby, she's not old. You'll see for yourself, directly we're married."

(2)

A queer little flicker passed over Modesta's face at the last word. It could not possibly have been contempt, and yet it was not a look wholly satisfying to Laurence's passionately benevolent instincts.

Ecco! So the Signor Lorenzo meant to marry her? *Mà! E curioso!* thought Modesta again, a wise, very wise, very mature woman called Modesta. . . .

But in a second she had turned to him, chattering gaily, excitedly, eyes sparkling, her hands carving quick questioning gestures; wholly a human child

again. Then was she really to see Londra? To leave Santa Nucia? To leave the kitchen and the saucepans and the washing-tank under the olives? But what would Rosina say? And might she tell la Lisa? (Lisa alone was always distinguished by her prefix, as though she were a famous *ballerina*.) No, no, better not. Always better to tell nobody. Signor Lorenzo should learn that she, Modesta, could keep a secret. And might she buy her own pretty dresses? Or would Signor Lorenzo's mother insist on going with her to all the shops? And were there many shops in London? And did the mother live near the shops? And what was she called? "*Commé si chiama, la sua mama?*" She was prudently discovering all that she could, beforehand, about Laurence's mother, who would be, she was convinced, from social reasons and also by reason of the usual shrill jealousies, her enemy from the start. For surely even in England they were jealous, the mothers?

"Belmont," replied Laurie, answering the last of the questions, and not even striving to recapture the rest.

"Bellamont? Belmonte?" Modesta repeated, fingering the name delicately with her tongue. "*E curioso*"—her favourite phrase. "It sounds like a city in Italy."

"Belmont was the name of the small town in Amer-

ica where my mother was born. But it also means 'beautiful mountain.' And she is very like that," he went on, sentimentally—and then burst out laughing at himself. For certainly Belmont, however you idealised her, was not in the very least like a mountain. And Laurence did not idealise her. He was heartily affectionate to his mother, in the ozone style, and as one is affectionate towards a practical necessity.

"She is American, your mother? We have sometimes seen Americans, here in Santa Nucia. They have many more dresses than the English, and are much more chic."

"All American women are princesses, Modesta, and need never work. It is the men who work, over there."

"And your father, does he work?"

Laurie told her a little about his father, who had been a doctor in Carey Town, in the farming Middle West. "He was a great many years older than my mother when they married. As I am older than you, Modesta."

"I am seventeen."

"And I am twenty-three."

Suddenly they kissed each other. Her arms clung round his neck; she was not frigid now; but she still pursued her inquiries, rather as though she were her own parent settling a daughter's affairs.

"Your father, will he be angry if you marry me? Will he throw his boots?"

"No," Laurie explained, amused, but thinking this too pathetic. "My father died twenty years ago—not long after we all came to Europe and settled down. But even if he were alive, he would not throw his boots. It is not in the character of English and American fathers."

Modesta sighed deeply. "I think I shall like to be married to you," she said. "We will hide and run away, yes? It is the best way."

Ferrier frowned. "It's the worst way. Of course I'll go down at once to speak to your father." He was determined that his wooing should be as courteous as though Modesta were the daughter of an English duke.

She shrugged her shoulders. "He will not be pleased!"

"Not be pleased?" incredulously. "Surely. I mean—I don't want to be a conceited fathead, but surely. . . . Look here, Modesta, I'm serious, you know." He could not help a tiny twang of mortification that she had not abandoned herself in wilder gratitude to the donor of marvels that was Laurence Ferrier. Then he dismissed his own thought as intolerable. . . . It was Modesta's charm that she could so softly sur-

render to her good luck, taking it for granted. Yet: "I'm serious," he repeated.

"*Si, si*. One can see that the signor Lorenzo is serious. But my father, he will not believe it."

"Why not?" argued her rich and eligible fiancé.

"Because my father is like that!" Inexplicably she broke out in a passion: "You are a foreigner, Signor Lorenzo, and you do not understand."

"I'm not a foreigner," contradicted an indignant English boy. But then, again, he was swept by laughter at his own inanity. "Well, at least I understand *you*, Modesta, don't I?"

She guarded her reply; thrust it down, unspoken, into a sheath. A moment ago, her slanting glances at Laurie had betrayed a happy little rogue, hinting at secrets, babbling them, pleading for easy favours faster than he could scatter them. But now she had chosen to withdraw into an alien mood.

"Modesta!"

"*Sara?*"

A mood that he associated with the inscrutable silhouette of her father, as it had silently passed across the window before his eyes . . . reminding him, at the time, of Modesta. To and fro it shifted, that ridiculous likeness. . . . "These are my mysteries!" Had Modesta, too, her mysteries? "*Sara!*" thus her race, when they chose, saluted the stranger;

meaning, in obeisant flattery: "Saracen"—one of a nation who long ago had conquered them. But, still propitiating, they had retired back and back from the shore into their own mountain villages where they were safe, and then . . . might a flavour of mockery have crept into the salutation? "*Sara!*" Modesta had called him, in soft surrender, but Laurie was not satisfied.

"Modesta, you're not to forget, ever, that we're equal, you and I. *Equal*," he insisted. "I'm not your master—that's all nonsense! That's all done with. You don't understand, darling—and how should you?—how splendid it is for a man and a woman to be equal when they belong to each other!"

(3)

. . . Modesta lay back, indolently listening to his eager stammering talk. Her lips moved now and then. "*Si, si*" . . . while she watched a pair of lizards, two bits of wrinkled leather, flat against the wall. Ah, now some noise had startled them; they whisked out of sight into the chinks of hot stone. . . . And there was a Santa Caterina—a pity she had not a tumbler, to catch it and make it pray, grotesquely uplifting its green crooked legs. . . . "*Si, si . . . davvero. . .*" In two months these figs would be ripe. Perhaps she

would not be here to pluck them. Perhaps, by then, she would be a *signora*. . . . “*Si, si . . .* as you wish—*come vuole lei.*” Dio, how these English gabbled! Yet he was *simpatico*, this Lorenzo. More *simpatico* than the Signor Rice, whom she and Lisa privately called, in fun, Signor Risotto. Did they have such good jokes over in England? It was not a merry country, she had heard. What matter?—there would be no dishes, no boots. “*Si, ha raggione, sempre raggione.* . . . You are always right, Signor Lorenzo. . . .” She would do no work at all, except arrange the flowers—that was always a pleasure, arranging flowers, and a *signora* could do it without losing caste or dignity. For had not la Signora Althea herself lifted the duty away from Modesta, saying: “You arrange flowers so nicely, Modesta, but it takes up too much of your time. Leave it for me to do.” So that Modesta, defying her, had been forced to snatch the flowers in wild haste from the garden, before la Signora was down to breakfast, and cram them without arrangement into the vases and jugs; and that she was sorry to do, for she loved the flowers, and it hurt her taste to have to treat them thus feverishly. But there was no other way, for la Signora was so stubborn; she had a *testa dura*, a hard head. But when she, Modesta, was *signora*, no servant should be allowed to touch the flowers. And she would move about

very slowly, very languidly, wearing a big shady hat, and carrying a sunshade, and someone should follow her with a basket, and she would choose here a bloom and there a bloom, all of the most beautiful. And snip them off with great care and long stalks. "*Basta!*—Enough!" and someone following her should carry them into the house. "Put them down there on the table, and bring me many vases—blue and pink vases with paintings on the outside." . . . And Signor Lorenzo, and many other noble *signori*, passing the window of the *salone*, would peep in and say: "See, la Signora Modesta, is she not graceful when she arranges the flowers? No one can arrange flowers so aristocratically as la Signora Modesta. But, *la povera*, she will be tired, so tired, when she has finished." . . . She would lie in a big armchair, while someone fanned her, and il Signor Lorenzo brought her *medicina* and a lump of sugar. . . .

Modesta lay back on the grass, gazing at the brilliant turquoises of sky set at all angles into the matrix of dark nespoli leaves. She, who had been forced to service, had found a servitor. And she was content.

CHAPTER III

(1)

As though he were wearing chain armour, Laurence strode into Santa Nucia in search of Borello. He had decided that he was going to be very stern but very gentle with the erring father of Modesta; and only when Borello was reduced to an abject state of penitence for past mistreatment of his peerless daughter, would Laurence unfold, like a scroll written in gold, the wonderful tidings that he was going to marry this little Italian peasant girl. Borello naturally would start back in amazement, protesting that such good fortune could not be. And then, again sternly but gently, the knight-errant crusader would rebuke him for his inverted snobbery. . . . "Why should not such good fortune come to your second daughter, Borello? I'm only a very ordinary man. You are too weighed down by class distinctions!" Laurie did not pause here to reflect whether or not he knew the Italian for "class distinctions." Insensibly, preparing the rest of his speech, he slipped into the Borello cadences already familiar to him: "Your daughter is modest; your daughter is virtuous; your daughter is

beautiful. You have never appreciated her, you. But I, who have seen these qualities in her, I know well that she is far too good for me. Therefore I wed, not as you think, below me, but far, far above me. It is a privilege," spouted Laurie, losing his way in the narrow twisting streets of Santa Nucia, and annoyed that he was again and again passing through the same archway, "it is a privilege for me to serve her on bended knee for the rest of my life!"

And here, fortunately, he ran into Lisa, on an errand for the Rices. On his inquiry, he was conducted by her, round-eyed and gasping, all the way back again up the mule path, past the villa, to a house on the next spur of hill, where Borello was at work in the garden, building a wall.

The interview was not a success from Laurie's point of view. For one thing, his Italian was inadequate; and also he was sensitively aware that Borello was building a wall extremely well, with a deft and delicate touch balancing the stones. Laurie, who had his own sincere patches of humility, could not help recognising that he himself could not do anything in the world as well as this. He was impelled by this involuntary homage of an amateur towards a genius, to cut all the very-stern-but-very-tender part already rehearsed; and instead, blurted straight out that he was

going to take Modesta home to England and marry her at once.

Borello laughed heartily. "It is not often," he said, unaware that Modesta had silently formed the same estimate, "that the English *signori* make jokes!" And he invited Laurie to divide a flask of wine of his own stamping, that evening at the shop down by the *livello*.

Laurie managed to convince Borello that his announcement was no joke.

In silence, Borello lifted the heavy stones into their rhythmical pattern on the half-built wall. He was not amused any more. His brow was growing blacker every moment. Laurie, uneasy at the lack of response, tried to urge some geniality into the atmosphere. He knew that Borello could speak if he tried—he had heard him that morning. Thinking of Modesta, he stumbled into a boy's rhapsody. "She is so beautiful, your little daughter. She is like a princess! She shall be treated by me as though she were a princess!"

But his future father-in-law went on building the wall.

Laurie lost patience. "*Corpo di Bacco!*" he swore, borrowing the phrase, hoping it might animate Borello, who was possibly overpowered at the lordly bestowal of so much honour to him and his family. "*Corpo di Bacco!* Can't you speak? Aren't you pleased? I tell you I'm going to marry Modesta!"

"And I tell you, you are not!" shouted Borello, in a rage. And like water surging through a perforated barrier, his eloquence poured over Laurence, and poured down the valley. Most of it Laurie could not understand, but luckily Borello was given to repeating himself, and at last it was fairly evident that, far from being overwhelmed by the honour, he was insulted and furious.

For he did not believe that the *signore* meant to marry Modesta.

He believed that the *signore* did not wish her well.

"But look here, you damned fool! If I didn't wish her well, why should I take all this trouble to come and talk to you about it, first?"

"*Punto giusto*," Borello admitted, magnanimously. "The *signore* has made a just point."

"Well then——"

But having conceded so much and no more, Borello lopped the just point altogether from his side of the discussion, because he could not find an answer to it. A habit that simplified all quarrelling, for Borello.

Laurie tenaciously clung to it. "If I didn't wish her well, I should have——"

"It is all a lie! I will guard my daughter, I! You do not wish her well."

"But I tell you, is it likely that——"

"You do not wish her well. That is enough for me. I am practical, I, for the protection of my daughters."

"But look here, you . . . you mule——"

And thus the quarrel revolved without progression, until Laurie, exhausted, gave way. What right had this man to assume his daughter betrayed before anyone even began to betray her? He remained seated upon his metaphorical white charger, but his dignity had suffered a rough buffeting.

With puzzling irrelevance, it occurred to him that he would like to postpone the white charger business, accept Borello's invitation, and spend the evening in rough carousal, sitting on barrels in the recesses of the dark good-smelling little wine-shop, and hearing all round him earthy talk of the olive-harvest, tasting last year's wine, and hearing prophecies of what September's *vendemmia* would bring forth. . . . It would be not much fun, though, unless he could bluff them into accepting him entirely as one of themselves. And for such glorious impersonation he would need to have mastered the language and dialect. The rollicking impulse touched him like a breath of wind and was gone again and forgotten.

"I warn you, Borello, nothing you can do or say will prevent Modesta from loving me!"

"*L'amore?* Pff!" Borello turned away from Laurie with a final impressive gesture impartially claiming

alliance with earth, air and water, and resumed his work.

Laurie glowered at Borello's back, wearing a torn and dingy jerkin and a pair of old sea-faring trousers curved in strong incredulity. Supposing he hit Borello hard enough, would Borello believe him then to be an upright, chivalrous, honourable, and well-intentioned young suitor? No, it was no good using his fists, for Rosina and Modesta and Lisa went home to sleep every evening, and the more he inflamed this brute, this Shylock of a father, the more his beloved would have to endure. And she was too small and slight and fragile for endurance. She ought to be handled as though she were a perfect nectarine not yet ripe upon the tree. Could Borello be trusted to realise that Modesta was a nectarine? No. "I must get her away as soon as possible, without saying anything," thought Laurie, and he swallowed his wrath.

He heard footsteps, and thought it might be Modesta herself. To his relief, it was only Alan Rice.

"So there you are! I've been hunting for you all over the place. Giving him a lesson in wall-building, Borello?"

Borello muttered something.

"What?"

But the man did not straighten himself nor reply;

and Alan took Laurie by the arm and marched him away.

"What have you been doing to upset the fellow? He looks like thunder!"

"I want to marry Modesta," said Laurie, glad of being able to express his decent intentions in his own language at last.

But otherwise the scene did not differ much from the previous one. Alan, from a less parental point of view, felt very much the same as Modesta's father on the subject. Laurie could not persuade him that it was a matter for high seriousness. And Alan could not decide whether the young lunatic were suffering from an attack of socialism or calf-infatuation. But he advised him to start for Rome the very next day, and he added that Modesta was a baggage.

"You too?" said Laurie, bitterly.

"Well, look at the mess she makes of cleaning my shoes!"

"Good Lord! She oughtn't to *have* to clean them! You're a man, aren't you? And she's a girl. It's preposterous, it's uncivilised that she should have to slave for you, mucking about with your beastly boots, and brushing your rotten muddy coat!"

"Well, I'm——" Rice said no more. He was beyond speech. Yet he remained convinced that as far as Modesta was concerned, Laurie was up to no good.

It was but another version of "he did not wish her well." The youngster was carrying things rather too far. Alan, aggrieved, left Laurie, and went off for a tramp by himself.

(2)

He returned home, refreshed, to find that Althea had meanwhile been visited by Borello.

"Lucky I was out," remarked Alan, who shared a chubby masculine delusion that when they were somehow absent from a scene of trouble and complication, it was less by a peculiar talent for melting away and just not being there, than by sheer good luck. "Was he violent?"

"No, I rather liked him. He seemed really worried about this business. He's a good father, you know, Alan."

Alan grinned. "There are fathers *and* fathers," he admitted. "Mine was a good father, and he wasn't a bit like Borello. What's going to happen? I mean, he'll beat Modesta, of course, but what's going to happen besides that?"

"He wants me to take her to England with me, when we go next week, so as to get her out of Laurie's way. I told him Laurie was going to Rome, but he

seemed afraid that he'd hang about here if we left Modesta behind."

"I'd much rather take Rosina," argued Alan. Which was not helpful. "Look here, let's take Rosina. She's a darling, and she never gets given a good time."

Althea sighed patiently. "Will you go down to the *municipio* to-morrow, Alan, and see if we can get a passport for Modesta to leave Italy? It won't be easy."

✓ Alan Rice said three things. He said: "Your Italian is much better than mine." He said: "My shoulder's hurting me badly again." He said: "I'd much rather take Rosina along with us."

"By the way," after his wife had settled these three points, and had been rather heartless over the old wound in his shoulder, "by the way, Althea, I've never met Ferrier's mother. She was a friend of yours once, wasn't she? I suppose, being born an American, it was she who put it into her son's head that Modesta is not to clean my shoes?"

Althea's forehead wrinkled slightly in an endeavor to remember what were the views of Belmont Ferrier on this important question. "She's devoted to Laurie; I remember that. But I haven't seen her for eleven years—or is it twelve?"

"It's an infernally silly affair, anyway."

"Borello doesn't believe that Laurie really wants to marry her."

"Nor do I!" barked Alan. "It'll all be over in a few days, before we've got the passport, I expect. I've told him he can shunt off for Rome to-morrow, anyway. I hate to be inhospitable, but I can't have him sitting about at meals, silently grieving because I'm such a bounder as to let Modesta pass round the *spaghetti*! Once he gets to Rome, he'll fall in love with that woman—you remember, Althea?—the one I was so mad about."

Althea, anxious to avoid hearing a confession that might be upsetting, remarked: "Modesta will shape well as a lady's-maid, I'm sure, with a little training."

"She's all alone in a little room to herself, off the garden with the pillars in it," Alan persisted, "not mixed up with the other statues."

His last word brought enlightenment. "Oh, you mean the headless Aphrodite of Cyrene? You think our impressionable young man will succumb to her?"

"*Much* better-looking than Modesta," Rice affirmed. "And he's going to be an architect, too, so there you are. Though I don't suppose he'll do much good at it."

"No, Laurie isn't very clever, is he? And wasn't he sent down from Oxford? I never like to ask him about it in case——"

"In case he bursts into tears? My dear, you're taking a Girls' High School view of the whole affair. He's probably proud of it. It was a damn good rag,

too. My young brother who was up at the same time—Reggie, the one in South Africa; the one you don't know—he says that Ferrier had 'em all magnificently spoofed, even the Dons."

"Spoofed?"

"He impersonated some mad Russian bloke—a monk or a convict or Messiah or Cossack Grand Duke—I don't remember which—but he lectured sheer inspired nonsense to a packed hall without anyone spotting it. And he's never done anything to touch it since."

"As a man's life-work," remarked Althea, somewhat disdaining her husband's boyish enthusiasm, "it sounds to me rather a futile accomplishment."

A knock at the door. "*Aventi!*"—and Modesta entered, bearing a pile of clean folded washing.

"I could not tell, I, which were the handkerchiefs of the *padrone*, and which were of Signor Lorenzo. So I have given them all to the *padrone*."

Her manner was composed and deferential as ever. She lifted eyes that were wholly lacking in guilt, seeking approbation from her employers for her zeal.

"Then you'd better give half of them back to Signor Lorenzo," grunted Alan Rice; and he added, before his more discreet wife could stop him: "He'll need them to mop up his tears, if he's going to be married."

Modesta's sober mien suddenly broke into irrepres-

sible ripples of laughter at the *padrone's* wit. Still laughing, she dumped down the washing and ran downstairs and into the kitchen.

PART TWO

CHAPTER I

(1)

"It is very curious indeed, *signora*," remarked Modesta, "that you do not hate me."

Belmont Ferrier smiled at the sedate little figure of her son's wife, sitting very upright on the window-seat of the riverside cottage, and watching with polite incredulity an English summer: rain swamping the garden; a spiteful grey wind chopping swirls and eddies into the stream at the end of the lawn.

"Why should I hate you, child?"

"Because two months ago I was in the service of an English *signora*, and you are an American *signora*, and yet I am not in your service. I sit in the *salone* with you, and we talk about Lorenzo."

"Do you love Lorenzo, Modesta?"

Modesta replied that yes, *sicuro*, la Signora had brought up Lorenzo to be a good husband, and she, Modesta, was grateful to la Signora; also for being so kind to her, and teaching her so patiently how to speak English, and how to wear the clothes of the English and follow their customs. . . . "All of them good,"

added Modesta, with a little gesture of approval, like a benison.

Belmont Ferrier was puzzled. She certainly expected more enthusiasm about her good-looking son, from this little Italian girl whom he had followed to England, and married after she had been three weeks with Althea Rice. The Rices had been alternately wheedled and bullied by Laurie into giving their consent, and then into using influence with officialdom and Consulates, so that there were not too many formal difficulties to contend with, over their marriage at the Registrar's—once Modesta had serenely lied over her age. Alan might have moved more warily in the matter had not the sudden death of an uncle brought him into possession of an estate in the west of England. He and Althea would not, therefore, be returning to Italy, and would not have to face Borello: "So as Belmont approves—though it's damned odd that she should——!"

Belmont thought now: even supposing that Modesta cared for Laurie only ambitiously, even then would she not have been shy, more defiant? Would she not have been truculently on the look-out for snubs all the time, determined to assert herself from the beginning? Or else, along other lines, nervously anxious to propitiate, to run about and fetch and carry for her mother-in-law?

Modesta had done none of these things. With a monkey facility for imitation, imitation so perfect that a few minutes after she had adopted a new pose or manner it seemed already to have become part of herself, she yet retained a prim but courteous quality of self-possession.

"Aren't you ever homesick, Modesta?"

"But no. It is more *chic* to be here than at Santa Nucia."

And as for service, without any violence or visible coercion, Modesta already kept the whole household busy, waiting on her. She had a real talent for laziness, and Belmont was amused at the display.

She said: "Come over to the fire, child. You look frozen. We want another log put on."

Modesta agreed. And rang the bell.

Belmont, who had phrased her request ambiguously on purpose, smiled at the result. When Ellen had built up the fire, tossed her head at Mrs. Laurence Ferrier, and left the room again, Belmont remarked: "You mustn't call me '*signora*,' Modesta. It's the one thing you just keep on forgetting."

"True, I forget. I will call you '*madre*,' as you wish. At home, at Santa Nucia, if the only son of the *sindico*—who is a very great man with a large house, though not so many serious chairs as you have, *madre*—if his son had married the daughter of Borello, the wall-

builder, then the wife of the *sindico* would not so have adjusted herself."

"How would she have behaved?" It was rarely that Modesta was in a chattering mood, so Belmont encouraged it, certain at least of not being bored.

"She would have screamed for many days and nights; she would have used dreadful words—words that you do not know, *signora*, like 'cow'; she would have wrapped herself in a black veil; she would have called in the priest, and all her relations, and all the relations of her husband; she would have cursed her son and wept. They would have had much difficulty in persuading her to eat, even her favourite dishes; and had I been brought into the room where she was lying, she would have fainted, and she would have remained fainting, not all the time, but very often, until the *sindico* her husband had made a fresh *testamento* without the name of their son."

"I see. And did you expect me to do all that when Laurie first brought you down here?"

An emphatic little nod from Modesta. Yes, she had expected as much as that and more, from the terrible unknown mother-in-law.

"And I could see, *signora*—*madre*, that Lorenzo, too, was surprised at your welcome and hospitality."

Hospitality? Welcome?—Why, as though you would not give unbounded welcome to the girl who

had been the unconscious means of bringing back your son to dependence, when you believed that he might have broken away for always, leaving Belmont Ferrier silent and proud in her desolation. But for Modesta's needs, Laurie might never have needed support again. . . .

Belmont suddenly gave way to an impulse of complete frankness—the kind from which one always withholds the main point: “Modesta, I’m terribly fond of my son. I was terribly afraid of losing him whenever he married. And if he had married an English girl, I would have lost him.”

✓ “But no, *signora*, you would always have been the mistress of his house!”

Belmont Ferrier had been to Italy, and she knew what sort of a picture Modesta inevitably carried in her mind, of a household to which many sons and many daughters bring home their wives and their husbands, who are suffered to live with their parents-in-law, to help with the *ménage*, to do as they are bid; and still the indomitable mother does not give up one fragment of her power; and still the sons reverence her, and the daughters wait on her, and she scolds them all, and nobody ever goes out except the men of the house. . . .

So, after a pause, Belmont painted for Modesta a companion picture, vivid in contrast, of a typical Eng-

lish marriage, where the son finds out his bride, not by arrangement, but by inclination; and they dwell neither in the home of his parents nor of hers, but independently and without interference in a home of their own. . . . "So you see, Modesta, I'm a selfish woman; and I was glad to welcome you, because I gained by Laurie's choice. You're a Latin, and you have the Latin point of view about family life. . . . *You* won't take Laurie right away from me, as an English girl would have done?"

Modesta politely intimated that when Belmont became an old and wrinkled crone, there would certainly always be a place for her at Laurie's fireside. . . . "When you are forty, like *la Mamma* on her last birthday."

Belmont, who was forty-two, and looked as though she might easily have been the daughter of *la Mamma*, was tactful enough not to enlighten Modesta over her lapse in arithmetic. She guessed that it would mortify the child to know that her own mother had been unnecessarily ill-treated by destiny, bundled into shapelessness, her comeliness flown while still in her twenties, as happens so often with the hard-working, sun-beaten women of the South, weighed down by their burdens, resigned, yet shrilly despondent. No, she did not want Modesta to compare them. But Modesta had already said, in sincere compliment, to Laurie: "Your

mother is more fine and more delicate even than the Signora Rice. She is like a flower."

"What flower?" asked Laurie.

Modesta remained silent. In truth, Belmont had reminded her of a certain faintly-tinted blue flower, its clear star of petals hidden and yet half revealed in a mist of thin green tendrils. But this plant was common, *rustica*; it grew wild all over the olive terraces in June, and any *contadina* might pick it. So naturally she could not insult the mother of Lorenzo by comparing her with a mere wild flower, of no expense whatever.

But a few days later, she suddenly noticed this same flower growing in Belmont's garden. Obviously, in England, it was carefully cultivated, honoured and protected. So now the comparison could safely be made: "See, Lorenzo, there is the flower that I said was like your mother!" And Laurie had told her that it was called "Love-in-a-mist."

Meanwhile, beneath her formal yet affectionate reassurances of bath-chairs and hot-water bottles for Belmont's middle-age, Modesta was thinking shrewdly and rapidly. After all, she was alone in England, and England was a strange alien country, and one must look for oneself in the future. Lorenzo's mother had been kind to her so far, yes, but who could tell how long kindness would continue? . . . The English

were foreigners, and Laurie's mother was by birth an American, which was even more foreign. Modesta admired Belmont intensely; her tallness, her slenderness, her fugitive beauty that drifted and departed and was not always stamped hard upon her face so that you grew tired of saying: "How beautiful!" And she was fair, and yet not golden; sorrowful, and yet she smiled; amusing, and yet her voice was never raised to flamboyant insistence of herself as an entertainer. She sat so still, and yet she was restless. She had all the most contradictory gifts in the world, so it seemed to Modesta, and yet she did not care for any of them, and by so much made them the more precious. She was elegant, and yet she did not boast of her clothes; she was lonely, and yet she did not complain; she had a son and a thousand friends, and yet her hours seemed often barren; she had the manners of a queen, yet she did not rule like a queen; she had a secret, and never told it. . . . So far had Modesta's shrewdness carried her after five weeks' deeply interested scrutiny. Belmont had, beyond all, gained the Italian girl's passionate gratitude, by really appreciating her, without effort or patronage. A conscientious attempt to hide dismay at Laurie's choice, and to do her duty by an ignorant little *contadina* would have left Modesta composed, but inwardly forlorn. But Belmont had treated her from the very first as one *signora* to another. . . .

And Modesta appreciated appreciation. And because she so passionately admired Belmont's quality, she wanted her as an ally; yet she did not think Belmont's allegiance could be easily won, unless she, Modesta, had something she could give Belmont. . . . "You won't take Laurie right away from me, as an English girl would have done?" She had fear in her when she said that. Modesta wondered whether they could drive a bargain together, she and Belmont. She quivered a little at the idea. And yet it did not seem quite her own. Already there was understanding between them, an understanding that Laurie the male could not share. . . .

"*Madre*, will you promise——" began Modesta. Then she stopped. . . . Even that tinkled in her ears, as though she were echoing someone else's thought.

Belmont reached out for a cigarette. Her hands, long in the wrist, indolent, always reminded Modesta of beautiful gloves; she did not know why, except that they were supple and yet insensitive . . . like the touch of kid, fine, soft creamy kid. Modesta had never worn gloves before she was married. She had an ingenuous passion for them; they were to her an expression of subtlety. She was being very subtle now.

. . .

"I will not take Lorenzo away from you, I. He is your son, and it is right that he should obey you and

remain with you and do your will, even if I am his wife. But for the moment, see you, he will listen more to me than to you, because it is natural, and we cannot fight against nature."

"Very proper sentiments," murmured Belmont.

"But then," continued the strategist, "it may be that Lorenzo will not always be to me as he is now. Now he acts as I tell him, for men, they are *così* while the spell lasts. But later, when he pulls one way, and I, I pull another way, like two mules upon a road, then, *madre*——" She hesitated. "If you are there . . ."

And suddenly she felt uneasy. Belmont, lying back in her chair, was still faintly smiling into the flames. Had she heard Modesta at all? seen her dramatic, quick little gestures filling in the pauses between each sentence, covering up and smoothing down what had not been said, but which hovered in the air between them? It had always been so easy, managing Lisa, managing *la Mamma*, and *la Signora Rice*, and *Mad-dalena*, her great friend in *Santa Nucia*; and the doctor, when he came to vaccinate her; and, of course, Lorenzo. Why, everyone was easy to manage for Modesta, who had the gift!

If only Belmont would speak!

At last Belmont said: "It's really too wonderful of you, Modesta, to promise that you will never take my

son away from me. I can't tell you how glad I am. Dear little Modesta!"

Modesta waited, her lips parted, aware that to clinch the bargain, more must inevitably follow. . . .

Belmont went on: "Laurie is simply devoted to you. Anyone can see that you needn't worry at all about his remaining devoted. . . . We leave here, you know, in three days. The river season's over long ago." They had stopped for an extra few weeks for the sake of Modesta's English, which, however, was acquired so rapidly that had Laurie been in a more perceptive state, it might have occurred to him that Rice had been right in supposing that more than groundwork was there already.

"You'll surely like my London flat, Modesta; it's in a very *chic* part of the town."

"Ah!" Modesta could not help being attracted by her own favourite expression. Yet she had a suspicion as of something drifting further and further away from her, like a boat that she had thought securely moored. When could the rope have been severed without her noticing? And yet she could not but sit enthralled and listen—Belmont was talking of such fascinating matters:

"One doesn't dress much, of course, down here, especially through August. And Laurie bought you some quite nice things before he brought you to me.

The boy's taste isn't at all bad. Or was it yours? But next week we'll plan your clothes properly, Modesta, you and I together, in harmony with your style." The voice of the enchantress grew lazier and more seductive. "And in the spring, in March, I may take you to Paris, to Pensé-Lajeune. It's really important to go to Paris at least once a year, for clothes. . . ."

Modesta, also lying back indolently among the cushions, allowed her own voice to drop into the same modulations, lazy, seductive, in perfect imitation of Belmont. For now she admired Belmont even more fanatically than ever. *Dio*, how she respected her! She could not accurately have told why. . . . Nevertheless, here, she felt, was a more skilful hand than her own at promise-binding; more controlled, more inexorable. Then—in what had she involved herself? She had intended so much handed over from her side, so much from Belmont's side, exactly equal. But Modesta came of a race of bargainers, and she could not deceive herself that their conversation had worked out according to intention. . . . "So, remember, Modesta, and keep me to it, that I've promised to treat you to Paris in March."

Modesta had almost forgotten what advantage she had originally set out to gain. Probably Paris in March would do just as well!

CHAPTER II

(1)

MODESTA approved of her mother-in-law's high flat in Knightsbridge, with its glimpse between tall chimneys, over the trees of Hyde Park, to the faint mirage of hills and houses that they told her was Hampstead. . . . Modesta from Santa Nucia soon learnt to shrug her shoulders disdainfully at barbarians who lived N.W. Belmont kept three servants, and Modesta had hard work to fold away her intense interest in this species, viewed from such an unfamiliar angle. She felt as though she had been hobnobbing with a crowd down in the street, and then had slipped upstairs, put on a disguise, and was now looking out on them from a top window. Had she merely reversed positions with la Signora Rice, out in Santa Nucia, she would have had less curiosity, knowing well of what subjects the Rosinas and Modestas and Lisas of her own country must prefer to chatter, in their clipped, spicy dialect, so soon corrected to a smooth: "What thing does the *signora* want?" or "Did the *signore* call?" She knew well enough what food they ate in the kitchen, never sitting down at stated hours, but every now and then

gobbling some succulent tid-bit; on the whole caring very little, washing it down with wine and water, or coffee. . . . Even now Modesta inwardly pulled a little wry grimace as she sipped the eternal tea of the English. She would have known, even as Signora Rice knew, what were the treats of her staff, the *festas* and the dancing and the finery, down in the *citta* after nine o'clock; slick jokes flung about between the *giovanotti* as they paced the streets bare-headed in the perfumed air; the mutinous quarrels, warm eloquent reconciliations; and everywhere colour and speech, anger and laughter, all quick, quick, quick; and the little runnels and rivulets of diplomacy such as Modesta loved; and the necessity for work, such as Modesta hated. Rosina, with her wearisome exhortations, Lisa, with her childish games in which sometimes Modesta deigned to join, but more often despised; and presents from the *signora* and surprises for the *signori*; and between kitchen and dining-room, in more senses than one, a door which opened and shut easily; courtesy, and an exchange of humanities; an intimate interest taken and given, genuine on Rosina's side; on Modesta's, sometimes genuine, and sometimes ironically assumed; kindly legends that *la signora* would relate, gossiping with the three daughters of Borello about what the English did or did not do in their own land. . . . "But is it possible, *signora*?" "One day, Mo-

desta, one day, Rosina, I will take you to England, and you will see." Lisa had always declared in her own fashion, sturdy, uncouth, yet decisive, that she would not go to England, not she! Modesta growing up, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. . . . "Modesta, do you know where my face cream has gone?" "But, *signora*, it is on your table, look!" "Yes, but I had used hardly any, and now it is half empty!" "*E curioso, signora!*" Modesta knew well where the face cream had gone. So did the *signora*. Modesta and the *signora* respected each other's knowledge and made no further move in the matter. Modesta wanted to have a skin white and rosy like sea-shells washed up on the beach; but it had remained a clear golden brown, the colour of the grain which patched the lower hills in September. . . . Fig time, and grape time, and the excitement of the vintage; and then the heavy autumn rains, through which Rosina tramped up and down the hill, to and fro from La Casa Luceola, wearing the strong gum-boots which the *signora* had brought her from England, ugly but so useful. But for Modesta they had brought, instead, a pair of delectable little green shoes, with white fur round the edge, and she had been pleased that they had noticed so much difference between her and Rosina. . . . And Christmas, with more presents, and a welter of English and Italian customs; and jumbled up with the violets and anem-

ones came Modesta's Saint's Day, an anniversary which they told her did not exist in England; and then hot sun and cold evenings, and the *signori* rushing down the hill to bathe, long, long before any but the mad would dream of entering the water, before Santa Maria della Mare had passed over it and blessed it and pronounced it safe. And when you said: "*Signora*, it is true, is it not, that in England there is always fog, all the year, so that you can never see to the other side of the road?" the *signora* would laugh, and say: "No, no, Modesta, it is not as bad as that!" And then they went away, and the house was too quiet; and they returned again, with seven visitors and two Siamese cats. . . . Ah, but then it was *allegra*! Rosina and Modesta and Lisa had been delighted; surprised at the *signora's* apologies: "Isn't this too much for you, Rosina? Are you sure you can manage?" "*Si, si, si, si, signora!*" And "*Si, si!*" from Modesta. Seven new faces on which to speculate, later on, in the kitchen; nine, counting the cats. Seven new personalities to imitate with peals of laughter; and, best of all, new and unfamiliar clothes about the house: "*Che bella!*" And piles of washing to do up at the tank every day. But who minded that when there was so much novelty bursting in?

And always, always dreams. Dreams of herself in gold and silver dresses. . . .

The Siamese cats had died because they could not acclimatize themselves. Modesta was sorry about that. They had fascinated her, those little strange insistent egoists, with their wild clamour for notice . . . blue eyes and buff paws and tails and ears . . . graceful ferocious springs across the rooms from bookcase to shoulder, and *la signora* screaming. . . . Satan and Sin, they had been called. "What does it mean, *signora*, Satan and Seen?" And il Signor Rice, he had replied: "You'll know, one day, Modesta, that's certain. Better than most people, I should think."

And then June had come, and the fireflies, and Lorenzo.

(2)

And here she was, an English *signora*, Mrs. Laurence Ferrier. Modesta could not pronounce her own name, but she had visiting cards, and that was a joy. And a cheque-book. And her account at the Biggest Shop. Here she was, and in the kitchen the servants were talking; three: cook, housemaid and parlourmaid; but not in the least like Rosina, Modesta and Lisa. Modesta affected to be indifferent to their very existence, save for domestic purposes. Watching Belmont closely, she easily assimilated what were the uses of cook, housemaid and parlourmaid in relation

to herself; uses not so miscellaneous as at Santa Nucia. The cook, for instance, would do no more than cook for you? How unlike Rosina! And Mitchell, the parlourmaid, who put out your evening dress upon the bed, and then folded it away again after you had worn it, Mitchell did not seem to care which of the lovely silken things suited you best, nor even if you had just bought a new one. How unlike Modesta! Nor would Belmont ever have dared to bring in, without warning, seven visitors and two Siamese cats! And yet these three, Cook, Mitchell, and Ellen, could not please themselves, gaily and fantastically, in the matter of the clothes they wore all day long; they could not run in and out of the flat informally, nor stand about gossiping, even down in the riverside cottage, where it was *rustico*. Even there, you never, for instance, met Ellen in the garden, asking permission to cut flowers for the funeral of *la povera bambina* who had been born to the *donna di servizio* in the house of the schoolmaster, and which same *bambina*, the *signori* would be sorry to hear, had the *disgrazia* to be without a father. . . . Their lives and Belmont's life were so sharply divided, mistress and maid, that there might be sorrow on one side and joy on the other, and neither living in the same flat would be affected by the sight and sound of the other. "*E curioso!*" thought Modesta. But she was on the mistress'

side, and might not cross the boundary. Nor did she want to; for it was good at last, on the summit of dreams, to be indolent, and to wear gloves, and to enunciate, clearly and haughtily, as Belmont did: "Put it down to my account: Mrs.—Laurence—Fay-ree-air."

Yet she could not forbear from wondering what they said of her, Cook, Mitchell and Ellen? If they hated her, she did not care; she would give them more work, more and more and *more!* But if they laughed at her . . . Modesta clenched her small stubby brown fists, discontented that these, too, could not be forced into a copy of Belmont's . . . if they laughed at her——!

Then, suddenly, she reached understanding. They did not laugh; they did not imitate her foreign gestures; they did not care. They had their own affairs. She was confronted with the insipidity of performing her grandest rôle before an indifferent audience. *Dio*, how they would have exclaimed about her marriage, if it had happened in Santa Nucia! How her own people would have derided her, envied her, cheered her, begged from her, created scandal about her. But over here—where, disappointingly, she had seen only one fog, and that Laurie had called a river mist!—over here, her rise, her eminence, her grandeur, the dramatic change in her fortunes were taken for granted. Re-

luctantly, she reached the conclusion that one of the penalties for being a true *signora* is that you must crush down a wistful desire for having your signoraship noisily acknowledged. It did not occur to Modesta that English servants had no means of sifting one class from another, gentlefolk from peasantry, directly these were presented to them in foreign aspect. To them, the young master's funny wife was accepted as an Eyetalian—that covered all. So she carried herself with an effective, if slightly ludicrous air of dignity borrowed from Belmont. And she did not fly into rages with Mitchell and Ellen, because Belmont never condescended to rage. She pretended that they were beyond an invisible wall of glass, through which her commands could be heard, but which her curiosity might not penetrate.

Modesta was all this while being very subtly coached by Belmont, in the graceful art of being well-bred. She so passionately respected Belmont that the coaching remained unspoken. Modesta merely thought that of her own accord she was fulfilling her childish ambitions. Yet at times she could not but feel a little bit forlorn. There was no one with whom she could chatter freely, nor give way to every emotional wind that swept her, good or bad; no one. Long ago, she never knew by what instinct, she had adopted an odd little masquerade in which composure and irony were

successfully blended into the sedate Modesta known to the Rices; known now to the Ferriers and their circle. And even Laurie, her big, handsome slave of a husband, even Lorenzo was very little good as a play-mate; his games were alien from her understanding. He talked nonsense about being equals. "Equals? *Ma!*" Modesta's lips curved disdainfully. He might have been her master, that one, so big, so handsome, and with such splendid clothes, but equals, no. . . .

So she employed him.

CHAPTER III

(1)

BELMONT remarked, reading the morning paper: "The Corentins and their company are coming to London for a short season."

And Laurie replied with enthusiasm: "That means Nick! Good! It's ages since I've seen the old fellow. He doesn't come home half as much as he used to."

"No," said Belmont. And after a pause: "His work is in Paris."

"It seems queer. Not to be an actor, but to be a French actor."

"Not half so queer," laughed Belmont, "as to have an American mother and an Italian wife! I wonder how Modesta will get on with Nick?"

Modesta did not breakfast with them. She had her breakfast brought to her in bed. Even to model herself on Belmont, she would not forego this imperial luxury. Laurie went now to say good-bye to her, as he always did, before departing to Messrs. Groome, Hemingway and Waters, Architects, where Belmont presently intended to buy him a junior partnership.

He cried out, almost before he was in the room:
 "Good news, *bambina!* Nick's coming!"

"Neeck?" inquired Modesta.

"You've heard me speak of Nick. My brother."

"*Comé?* But I did not know you had a brother!"

"Well, he isn't exactly a brother. In fact, he's no blood relation at all. He's lots older than I am, but we were brought up together."

"Will he stay here?"

"Of course. It's his home."

"*E curioso,*" observed Modesta, shrewdly. "For where there is your home, there is also your bed. But I have not seen, here in this apartment, the bed that is Neeck's!"

"Oh, well, he's an actor, you see. A French actor. But Mother will tell you all about him. I'm late."

And after a fervent embrace, Laurence departed.

Modesta and Belmont met at lunch that day. For once they were both at home. There had been some talk, from Laurie, of taking a separate flat for himself and his wife, but Belmont—strangling the fear from her voice—had persuaded him to wait for a few months. She said that Modesta, who was acquiring poise with marvellous rapidity, was not yet quite ready to live independently as an English matron.

"Matron, mother? *Modesta?*" Laurie had laughed out loud. For their efforts with Modesta had resulted

in only one failure; she still looked like an Italian child, or, even more fantastically, like an Egyptian child, exquisitely dressed and beautifully mannered, eyes slanting towards Belmont for approval. . . . But not a matron.

"Leave her to me, perhaps, until the spring," Belmont suggested. "It's no hardship for either her or me. We're fond of each other. Then, if you like, we'll think about a front-door of your own."

. . . So Modesta, sipping her vermouth before the *entrée* was brought in, was glad to see that Belmont had not gone out just to-day; for she wanted to ask a lot of questions about this Neeck of Lorenzo's.

"Who is Neeck? *Madre*, who is Neeck?"

"Oh, he's a sort of a son of mine!" lightly.

"He is young?"

"Yes, quite young."

"You are fond of him? As fond of Neeck as of Lorenzo?"

"No!" cried Belmont with unnecessary vehemence. Then she recovered, and looked quizzically at her interlocutor. "What a lot of questions. Child, you ought to have seen by now, not only that I love Laurie, but how I love him."

"And Neeck?" continued Modesta, putting aside Laurie as unimportant.

Mitchell brought in the macaroni cheese.

Modesta, resenting this as a too easy method of making the foreigner feel at home, tolerantly refused the macaroni cheese.

“And Neeck?” she persisted.

Belmont Ferrier yielded up a few dry facts. Nicholas Lepuy was the grandson of a French *émigré* couple who had left Provence a great many years ago, to work on a farm outside Carey Town, in the Middle West, where Belmont’s father was the banker and big noise. They had been forced to leave Provence and their village and their patch of land with its Indian corn and aubergines, because Marie, their only daughter, was in trouble, and they feared the censure of the neighbours; had not dared face a future from which respectability had been beaten out with rods of shame. They fled many thousands of miles across the Atlantic, so that Marie’s child could be born where no one knew her.

. . . Modesta sat very stiff and upright, toying daintily with a chop. Her eyes were discreetly downcast. On the third finger of her left hand glittered an ostentatious wedding-ring.

Belmont continued: “Poor Marie died. She must have been a gay creature before all this happened. Nick, as a boy, hated the dullness of the farm, and the dreariness of living with his grumbling old French grandparents, shut away from everything that was

light-hearted and amusing. He came into Carey Town whenever he could. My husband, who was a doctor, you know, was always very kind to him. He took a real interest in the lad, as no one else did. When Laurie was nearly a year old, and Garnett retired, we all came to Europe for a change, and settled down and never went back. I've told you all about that, Modesta."

"Si, but you have not told me all about Neeck."

"Nick begged and begged to be allowed to come along with us. He was devoted to Laurie, and he simply couldn't bear the thought of being left behind for ever, no one to talk to, no chances, no fun. It just broke my heart to hear him. So we gave in, Garnett and I. His grandparents were glad not to be burdened any longer, for Nick, when he was bored, was just a torment about the farm. He was a fine mimic, and wanted to be an actor. French and English were all alike to him, but he felt somehow, though we had him brought up and educated in London, that he belonged more to France. It was in his blood. So when he was old enough—Garnett died not long after we had fixed our home over here—when Nick was old enough, I sent him to the Conservatoire to be trained. He has done very well since then. I'm proud of Nick; and he just adores Laurie."

Modesta reserved all comment. She had felt, from the very first mention of him, that there was more in the advent of Nick Lepuy than appeared on the surface. She was not prepared to swear whether Belmont were pleased or secretly wrathful at his sudden advent.

That evening, alone with Laurie, she remarked in a very shocked voice, that it was indeed a shame and a scandal about the mother of Neeck!

“What about her?”

“That she was not married to the father of Neeck,” explained Mrs. Laurence Ferrier.

“Sweetheart, that’s old history. What does it matter what happened thirty-four years ago?”

“*Comé?* He is so old, your Neeck? But then he is a man!”

“How old did you think he was, Modesta, not to be a man?” Laurie was teasing her, knowing how very arbitrary and inflexible she was in her notions of years; how this and that was young, and this and that was middle-aged, and how one was senile at fifty, but grown-up at fifteen!

Modesta relinquished her pose of matronly horror, and thrust at him in lazy mischief: “I had already made to myself a picture of Neeck, that at his last completion of years he was a baby of, perhaps, twenty-five.”

"You're a baggage!" said Laurie, kissing her. But Modesta drew back from his arms. And he remembered Borello, and that the term "baggage" would doubtless be unpopular among Borello's daughters. So he substituted hastily: "You're a darling!"

Modesta added her recent item of information about Nick's age, to what she had already collected in her mind. She decided, with a tremor of excitement, that Neeck was Belmont's lover; that Belmont was hiding radiant anticipation under a pretence of indifference; that Laurie did not suspect it; and that she, Modesta, would be both discreet and watchful. But whatever Belmont did was not only right, but *chic* and distinguished; for surely, so Modesta worried it out, no other excuse than a blind passion for Neeck would have induced this marvel of a Belmont to overlook the disgraceful fact that Neeck's mother had been betrayed by Neeck's father and had never achieved a wedding-ring. It did not occur to Modesta to wonder why she herself did not like Marie, poor Marie, who had been chased so far away from Provence to die on a lonely farm in the Middle West. Or why she could easily sanction a lover for Belmont, and even halo the affair, while Marie—Marie remained a different matter.

(2)

Nicholas Lepuy appeared at the flat two days before he was expected. Only Modesta was at home. His arrival confirmed her idea of him that he hoped to catch somebody doing something they would not be doing had they not thought he would not be there till the day after to-morrow. He brought along a preposterous amount of dapper luggage, which was left in the hall till Mitchell was given Belmont's orders. Then he ordered a cocktail, marched into the sitting-room, and impudently asked Modesta for a sister's welcome to a brother.

"But I am not your sister!" she informed him, precisely. "For you are not even the brother of Lorenzo."

"Brother of whom?"

"I call my husband Lorenzo!" grandiloquently from Modesta.

"*E magnifico!*" laughed Nick.

He was like every Frenchman that had ever existed; not the pastry-plump kind with beards, but the nimble, clean-shaven, charming-monkey type. Modesta was not impressed by his looks. But she fancied it might be worth while to hate him. For he had the vitality of one of her own countrymen. The air

about him tingled with unspoken audacities, and sometimes, indeed, they did not remain unspoken.

"So you know who I am?" he asked, raising his glass to her. "Did Lorenzo tell you? Or Belmont?"

Again that tingle in the air, although his mention of Belmont was casual enough. Yet Modesta was still not sure if he were Belmont's lover. She hoped not, for she found him ugly, with his thin brown face, his wide, swift, impudent smile.

"*La madre* told me a little of your story, and Lorenzo told me a little more. I offer you my sympathies, Signor Neeck."

Sympathies? He wondered what Belmont or Laurie could possibly have told this funny child about him or his career, that she should regard him with a manner that was decorously shocked, yet triumphant at being in a position to be shocked. He said to himself, unlike most people who had been surprised at the match: "This is just the bride I expected Laurie to bring home! The behaviour of a simple man is always so fantastic!" But already conscious of Modesta's antagonism, and delighted by it—for he preferred to light his matches on tinder than vainly to strike them against a sponge—he set out to provoke a confession of why she was so obviously glad of some unknown humiliation in his past:

"Sympathies? Yes, it was truly sad, wasn't it? But"

—daringly—“the same might happen to all of us!”

Modesta, not unnaturally, indignantly refused to accept this slur upon her own birth, and upon the birth of any sons or daughters that she and Lorenzo might have. Borello was only a wall-builder, but he had married *la Mamma*, and she and Rosina and Lisa were firmly legitimate. In a burst of rapid furious Italian, and forgetting even to be a *signora*, she explained this to Nicholas Lepuy, the son of Marie Lepuy and of no visible father at all. And she ended with a flourish of her wedding-ring, and a flamboyant account of Lorenzo’s honourable courtship and honourable marriage.

Nick could have shouted with joy. He adored contrast, and the sudden contrast here revealed between Modesta in her new and expensive coat of varnish, and the natural Modesta beneath it, was a challenge to his love of teasing. He was not in the very least a snob, so that the little peasant’s inevitable disdain of his own peasant mother did not cause him a single wince. He stood looking down at Modesta, his usually mournful eyes bright brown and twinkling. . . .

At that moment Belmont herself was seen standing in the doorway.

“*La madre!*” Modesta withdrew, as it were, from her own rage in order to watch this breathlessly anticipated meeting. For nothing would have convinced

her that there were no more than ordinary relations between these two. Her curiosity twitched with excitement.

Yes?

No?

No. Belmont did not love him. No.

As quick as that.

"Ah, Belmont!" He came forward, put his lips to her wrist, her gloved wrist, creamy, supple, insensitive.

"What a burglar you are, Nick! Do you ever come when you say you will?"

"Do burglars ever say at all they are coming at all?" he retorted.

"Well, no." And she added, more nearly in anger than Modesta had ever seen her, and yet over so trivial a point: "Why do you always put me in the wrong, Nick, the very second you see me?"

"Aren't you glad to see me, even too early?" Suddenly his voice was sorrowful, pleading for forgiveness.

"I can't bear to walk into a room, suddenly, and happen on somebody I—I wasn't even thinking of. It makes me feel upset. It makes me feel . . . oh, unprepared."

"Do you need to be prepared—for me?" He

dropped her hands; turned away. "I must go to Laurie when I want a hilarious welcome."

But how strange, thought Modesta, missing nothing, . . . For when she had herself attacked him on matters that men deem important—his mother's shame, his nameless birth—he had not minded at all; he had laughed. His skin was thick—*Dio*, but how thick! And yet in a second Belmont had pierced it.

They were not lovers, no. Belmont was sorry to see him, that was clear, though now she had conquered her agitation and was behaving charmingly.

"Dear Nick, naturally you are welcome. You can't expect me to line up and cheer like Laurie! It isn't my style. But it's just too lovely to find you here, even with all that luggage!"

"Is it too much?" laughed Nick. "You know my besetting sin!"

"I know you're a terrible dandy, yes. A steamer trunk, two suitcases and a hat-box for a week-end, and the Lord knows how much more for a three weeks' season in London. I found your pile blocking the hall, and thought the whole household had been moving out while I was away this afternoon. You haven't improved, Nick."

"In my clothes? But I assure you I have. You will see."

"No, in your sins!"

"Oh, in those!" Nick shrugged his shoulders. Then he said to Modesta! "It's no sin, is it, when anyone is as beautiful as I am, to care about dressing well?"

He was so serious that Modesta did not know how to answer. She did not think Nick beautiful, but perhaps Nick thought he was, and if so, she could not be rude to him in front of Belmont, for Belmont had often said that this was Modesta's flat, too, just as much as her own. Therefore it was incumbent upon Modesta to treat visitors with kindness, even if they had never had a father.

At last she said: "The Signor Neeck is wearing a very good suit; but one must not exaggerate; it is the soul that counts!"

Nick collapsed. He buried his face in his hands and shook.

"Modesta is perfectly right," murmured Belmont, her eyes drowsy and narrow with mischief. "It is the soul that counts. . . ."

Nick raised his head. He was flushed from laughing. "*Eh bien*, I am condemned. May I have a bath now, and put on another very good suit? I am what they call in books 'travel-stained,' which perhaps means dirty."

"Nick—I hope you won't mind? I must apologise. I wrote, but of course you left Paris too soon to get the letter. Still, you'll be perfectly comfortable at the

Hyde Park Hotel, and of course you're my guest while you stay there."

She knew that she had hurt him again, and more deeply this time. Well, that could not be helped. Under his seeming affection, his pleasure at being once more at home, why did he always show her that glint of enmity, as though to torment her were a pastime he could not altogether forego? Or—even if he had not shown it, he might at any moment.

But he was angry now as well as hurt. "You have no room for me here?"

"It isn't such a large flat, Nick, and now Laurie's married. . . . Of course I'd have squeezed you in if I could. . . ."

Nick smiled at her, the rueful beaten smile of surrender. "Or you'd have squeezed me out if you could? You always have, you know, Belmont. . . . Where did you say you'd arranged for my room? The Hyde Park? Ah, good, it's quite near. I'll take my things across now."

"You'll come back for dinner?"

"May I?"

"But of course, child! You must use this as your headquarters, you know, all the time you're here."

Yet what could she possibly have said, to light that sudden radiance in his face? "Headquarters," surely, was a cold enough word.

"Splendid. I'll be back in an hour, then. Send Laurie over to fetch me, and we'll have a drink together first. I want to see him."

"Why?" asked Belmont. And went straight on without waiting. "Yes, of course you do. You'll find he's looking fine. But—I forgot, you saw him not so long ago, didn't you? In Paris, when he went there—on his way to Rome."

"Yes, I saw him then. . . . I should have guessed, therefore, that you would not have room for me here."

"Modesta is small, but she makes a difference," lightly.

"I did not mean the difference of Modesta," with equal lightness.

A pause. Then: "Enough," said Nick. "We are eyeing each other like the two villains in a bad drama where each is about to pull the corpse from behind the other's back!"

"No corpses behind my back." Belmont held out her hands for him to see. He seized them, and drew her out into the hall, saying: "Your daughter-in-law will have just time, before you dress, to tell you her private opinion of Neeck! But it's my turn first."

"Yes, indeed it is." Belmont gave Mitchell orders to 'phone for a taxi. "The car has gone, I'm afraid. And what *does* Neeck think of Modesta?"

"A *grande dame* of impeccable virtue and respectability," said Nick, gravely. "She's horrified because I'm a bastard."

"Nick!"

"Darling Belmont, surely you aren't going to start being horrified, too, after all these years?"

"Modesta ought to be smacked!"

"No, it's quite in character. She's bound to be intensely conventional now. And she's bound to hate me, in spite of my very good suit, because we're both peasants. She didn't expect to meet a peasant among the *signori*!"

"I saw, the minute I came into the room, that her nostrils were curling, but I couldn't guess why. You're alarmingly astute, Nick . . . you frighten me."

"I? I don't do any harm." . . . "I don't do any harm," he repeated.

A long silence between them, while they waited for the taxi. Legs apart, Nick swayed slowly to and fro, from his heel to the ball of his foot. . . . Presently he hummed a jingle of song. . . .

Modesta, musing excitedly in the sitting-room, gave a sharp exclamation of pleasure. *Ecco!* She had solved the problem.

She had solved it thus:

Neeck was not the lover of Belmont: otherwise, indeed, she argued sensibly enough, why should Bel-

mont have engaged a room for him at the hotel? Even though she, Modesta, was now an extra one in the flat, she was not occupying the spare bedroom.

Belmont was afraid of Neeck. Afraid, and yet she grew vivid in his presence, as the pattern that has been dim on a brocade, in a sudden light will flower from its ground. And that, argued Modesta to herself, in a climax of perceptive inspiration, *that* was because in Neeck's presence she remembered her lover again, the unknown *amore* of years ago, while the old husband, Laurie's father, was still alive. And Neeck, Neeck undoubtedly was the only creature who knew that she had had such a lover; and at any moment he might tell Lorenzo. That would be dreadful. No wonder Belmont feared him! But she was brave, that one, she did not cringe in order to plead with him. No, she turned him from her flat; yet kept him her friend by hospitality and gentle speeches. She defied him, mocked him a little too. Perhaps in her turn she knew something about Neeck that he would not care to have told. *Dio!* What a heavenly imbroglio! All this was very much to the taste of Modesta. Her little nosing instincts were running to and fro, uttering small shrill cries of pleasure; choosing, rejecting, following up a scent. She, of course, was on Belmont's side. *Si, si*, what Belmont did was right

and aristocratic. For Neeck was only the son of poor Marie, who had been taken far away by her parents, across the sea to America, because she was wicked and had broken the village law; because she had been foolish and had not hidden it well. . . . Belmont, who was a *signora*, could be permitted these affairs, because she could adjust them. That is where Belmont of the *signora* class, and Modesta who had married into it, were superior to the poor Marie. What Belmont did was *chic*. She, Modesta, would also take a lover when she arrived at the crucial age of—chicanerie. Not yet, of course. She would discover, gradually, the exact age at which Belmont . . .

Belmont came back into the room. Her brows were drawn low; her eyes were troubled. Had she been too much on the defensive, and needlessly so? Should she, after all, have allowed Nick to remain?

“ . . . *Ouvre-moi ta porte,
Pour l'amour de Dieu.*”

She was not sure, even while it reproached her, whether he had been conscious of singing it.

Yes, she had been unreasonable. After all, if he had wanted to shake her sense of safety, he could do it equally well from a hotel as from here. He could do it equally well from anywhere.

But Nick would not. Nick was a *blagueur*, but you could trust him . . . once he had promised.

. . . She became aware of Modesta watching her.

“Well, Modesta, and what did you think of Nick?”

CHAPTER IV

(1)

NICK did not want them to see him act till the third and last week of the Corentin season, when they were putting on "Eve," which he assured the Ferriers was the most interesting of their repertoire, and held his own best rôle.

"But why shouldn't we go to 'Eve' and to their other plays as well?"

"As things are between us, I'd hate Modesta to see me as a footman," protested Nick. And he added, with a chuckle: "She told Laurie I was *rustico* and *ordinario*!"

"Nick, what nonsense! You don't play footman parts!"

He persuaded them, nevertheless, to wait for the first night of "Eve." Modesta was very excited about this special visit to the theatre, although she had been taken several times since they had returned to London. But "Eve" was associated in her mind either with ultra-modern fashions—or, better still, no fashions at all. . . . She prepared herself, delightedly, to be shocked by daring representations of what had

occurred before the fig-leaf period. Nick, eagerly questioned, would yield nothing but a laugh.

Everything they did had seemed to her charged with mysterious electricity since the appearance of Nick, this restless, dominating, provoking creature who would not settle down to be indolent like Modesta, to be graceful yet shadowy like Belmont, easy-going like Laurie. He flashed in and out of their lives all day long; he prevented Modesta from indolence, drew Belmont out of the shadows, roused Laurie from good-nature; he was for ever goading one or the other, teasing them on every suspected weak point, knocking them down and picking them up again, concealing, flattering, lashing. . . . You could not tell if Nick were fond of you or hating you; if his admiration concealed irony, or whether his irony were a mask for admiration. If you had any preconceived notion of what Nick's opinion would be, it came out as the exact opposite. His brain was quick as a lizard in movement, agile as a monkey; yet every now and then, where he could be most merciless, he would leap back with astounding chivalry, sensitive to a hurt which was still far in the distance. An odd man, Nick. But a man, certainly. Madame Corentin had once said of him that he was the only male in the company who had never made her feel maternal; never appealed to her for pity or

petting. He could bear any conditions as long as they stimulated; and he had the magic to render stimulating what to others would remain dull and flaccid.

Belmont once, unfairly, called him a buffoon.

"Why?" asked Nick, wheeling round on her. "Because I am wise? Because I am lonely? Or because I make you laugh?"

"All three."

"Right," said Nick. "But I am not a buffoon. Buffoons stand wistfully in the moonlight when they think that their lady is not looking, but hoping she is, and they make great sacrifices, and then they laugh—and die of a broken heart. A very cheap performance. *Ce n'est pas moi!* Grant it?"

"I grant it!" But Belmont looked forward to Nick already back in France, instead of animating her pearly serenity with showers of crackling fireworks.

Yet on the first night of "Eve" he astonished her. It was now three or four years since she had seen him act, for it so happened that her visits to Paris or the Riviera had unluckily coincided with his tours in America or in the provinces of France. And last time that his company was in London, she and Laurie had been with a yachting party. He was, she thought, a very finished artist. He played an old man, Adam. For Corentin himself was starring as Cain. The dramatist, Bertrand Lesueur, had taken for theme a

realistic presentation of the Adam and Eve family life, at the period of Abel's murder by Cain, and more or less in the Shavian style had challenged the situation by the spirit of modern psychology.

After it was over, Belmont and Laurie and Modesta and Nick returned to the flat for supper—for they agreed that the play was too good, too devastating, too uplifting, too provocative, too everything, to allow them to go on light-heartedly afterwards to a restaurant or night-club.

And Belmont remarked to Nick that it was strange how callously Bertrand Lesueur had worked to eliminate Eve's point of view from every episode, and yet had left an audience sorry for no one else.

Nick swung his attention from the prairie oyster which he was compounding for Modesta. Modesta had once heard Laurie mention this as a valiant pick-me-up; so she said, when a champagne cocktail was offered her: "Please, I would like a prairie oyster first. I have never eaten one, I. It would perhaps make me feel a little more gay!" For she was inwardly disappointed that they had not gone on to a restaurant where the music was *allegro*, and where her gold dress could be seen. The play had vastly disappointed her, too. They had all talked interminably in French, which she could not understand, and there were no *chic toilettes* in it, but neither was it in the least shock-

ing. A middle-aged Eve, grown stoutish, had worn very shabby skins that covered her knees; and even the killing of Abel was performed "off."

"A prairie oyster!" Nick cried. "Of course Modesta shall have a prairie oyster. I'll mix her one." He exchanged winks with Laurie, who went to fetch Worcester sauce and a raw egg. Then, standing at the sideboard with his back to the room, Nick made an excellent prairie oyster for Modesta's deeper experience.

"Here you are, Laurie, give this to your wife. Tell her not to *eat* it, though, but to shut her eyes and swallow it at a draught."

"Don't sip it, child, whatever you do!" Belmont did not care for the boisterous male quality of the trick they were playing on Modesta; but as Laurie backed up Nick, she did not like to interfere.

Of course Modesta sipped the prairie oyster. You could not swallow at a draught what had been promised to your palate as a new and delightful experience. She got the egg into her mouth surrounded by its stinging sauce, hesitated, twisted a tentative little tongue, would gladly have rid herself of the egg but did not know how . . . and ran choking out of the room.

"Witty!" murmured Belmont. "As enjoyed by brutal stockbrokers or decadent kings."

"Little fool," Laurie said; "she bit it. It's all right if you swallow it, rather nice, in fact." Still chuckling, but beginning to be slightly ashamed, he went to fetch Modesta, and brought her back, dignified and hating all men, to sit at the table, drink iced water and roll butter round and round inside her mouth, mute testimony that it was hot as a furnace. As far as she was concerned, the evening was detestable.

And now, oblivious of her boredom and her wrongs, the other three were quarrelling hotly. She could not tell about what, though she could understand here a word, there a sharp phrase rung out. And names: Adam! Abel. . . . Ah, *si*, that foolish play again. Not even a quarrel about real people. How strange, then, that they should get so excited over Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. Modesta watched Belmont with closest curiosity. Belmont's usually serene air was flushed and tumbled; she was evidently at war with Laurie and Nick, queerly glad of their alliance against her.

"Sorry for *Eve*? Sorry for her? Belmont, you're mad. You've missed the whole point. Eve is the criminal of the play. It was Eve, not Cain, who murdered Abel!"

"So Adam said, in that endless summing-up speech—though your delivery was magnificent, Nick——"

Nick replied with a mocking bow.

She continued: "And of course it summed up nothing. Except that Cain had no control over his jealousy of his young brother's luck. And we knew that beforehand. We knew——"

Laurie interrupted. "But Nick's right; Adam was right; who was responsible for working up all the jealousy? Eve, over and over again, by emphasizing that Abel wasn't only her favourite, but God's. A sort of blooming mascot. Marked out for it from birth. Whatever things he did, big or little, came right mysteriously, long before his roasted sheep sent up the smoke to heaven. That was only the last straw. Cain adored Abel—if only Eve would have let him. Rip-ping good fellow, Cain——"

Belmont looked straight at Nick . . . and laughed.

With one brief and sombre phrase, he clinched his point: "Eve followed success."

"Why shouldn't she? Wasn't Abel *hers*? She had borne him in bitter pain. . . . Men can't understand——"

Suddenly her phrases faltered. Modesta wondered to see her, in mid-battle, turn away from Nick, gravely regarding her, to Laurie, who was engrossed only in the theatrical issues. . . . This gave her command again. Her voice cut like a diamond through glass.

"Adam and Cain—both weaklings and failures.

And Eve had to live with them. No wonder hope was broken in her when Abel lay dead. Even if she *had* singled him out and spoilt him all her life—why didn't Adam interfere? Why did he just stand by and let it all go on and on? The usual husband and father, 'head of the family.' They want their comfort, they want to be left in peace. Afterwards, only, they say they 'saw it all coming'!"

"They're afraid of Eve, the mother."

"Granted. Oh—granted. Adam wouldn't have dared offend Eve all those years that the two boys were growing up. . . ."

Laurie shouted furiously: "Abel was a sanctimonious, self-righteous prig with a halo! I never could bear him. It was all so bloody unfair. D'you remember the verse they quoted on the programme? 'And Abel was a keeper of sheep, *but* Cain was a tiller of the ground.' It's all in that *but*. Why 'but'? Isn't one as good as the other?"

"Could Eve have helped that 'but'?"

"She slipped it in there," said Nick. "Just as between the two brothers she slipped a knife." And he threw an affectionate arm round Laurie's shoulders.

"Well," from Laurie, "I hope, anyhow, that young Seth turned out some good to poor old Adam, because Cain was *his* favourite son, and Cain had to chuck up his birthright and go into the wilderness."

"Seth? Seth was his mother's again. That epilogue——"

"The most subtle bit of satire in the whole play," Belmont agreed.

Nick arched his brows into devilish surprise. "*You* thought so? You, Belmont?"

"Naturally. The maternal spirit eternally triumphant."

"Eternally destructive."

"Her instincts wouldn't be dictated to either by Cain's burst of fratricide, or by Adam's belated complaints and moral thunders. She and God loved Abel. God backed her up by sending along Seth, years later."

Nick was shaken by sardonic laughter. "You actually interpreted the epilogue that way? *Nom de Dieu de Dieu!*"

The epilogue . . . a bland Eve proudly displaying her infant, her third son, her latest darling, to a lonely father still grieving for the loss of Cain: "And don't you feel, Adam, as though there was something *special* about this one? I'm sure none of my other children could kick with such strong legs! O yes, Jehovah's pleased with my Seth—I've had sign after sign." . . . The same trouble, beginning all over again. And Eve unaware of it. Young Eve of the apple, mature Eve of the quarrel and the blow and

the branding; and older Eve, still possessive, still unreasonably dangerous, eternally unaware. . . .

During the pause of Nick's speechless amusement, suddenly, into the silence, they heard Modesta sigh.

She sighed deeply. *Dio*, what nonsense were they talking, what serious, wearisome nonsense! And she with her feet in little gold brocade dancing shoes that had not been allowed to dance all that evening! What was the good of being a *signora* when your mouth was still hot, in spite of butter, and your husband and Neeck gabbling long words without meaning? So she sighed.

The sigh recalled to Laurie all the stout ideals that had once, in Santa Nucia, caused him to don armour. He had intended that Modesta should not only be a princess, but his intellectual equal; that she should never feel left out. He who treated his wife merely as a pretty toy was no more than a barbarian. Yet here was this pathetic little Modesta, on whom had been forced the outrage of a prairie oyster, submissive—save for a sigh—to an even worse outrage: casually eliminated from the conversation, not allowed a chance to show her opinions. . . . If Laurie had been remorseful before, he was overwhelmed now, at having forgotten her special claims; afire with penitence; swinging Modesta into the very centre of notice and importance—and then, when

she was dizzy and pleased with the clamour of his solicitude, insisting that she was tired, that he wanted her to himself. . . . One more glass of champagne, and then good-night to Nick, good-night to Belmont . . . darling, beautiful little Modesta!

And Modesta's frozen apathy melted in this heat, responded to his touch, and was glad of his stammered desire that he and she should be alone; desire more eloquent in his eyes than in mere words. *Ma!* He was looking handsome to-night, this young husband! Was he awake at last? She had been angry over the prairie oyster trick, but did not resent it for long. For she could see, even with her mouth like a roasting oven, that it was a joke, just a man's joke; no more peculiar to English *signori* than to Italians of her own class. But to pay no attention to her afterwards, to be too absorbed in some silly talk about nothing, but nothing at all, not scandal nor money nor politics . . . *that* would have been unpardonable had it lasted a minute longer. But he had been drawn back to her again—naturally. . . .

"*Buona notte,*" said Modesta, demurely, to Belmont. "*Buona notte e buon riposa.*" . . . And then she smiled at Nick, a little provocative smile, tremulous, happy, tilted at the corners; it taunted him for not being Laurie to-night, when she wore her golden

dress, and all the world might have desired to be Laurie. . . .

And Nick's returning smile was unexpectedly sympathetic, disappointingly free from renunciation. It said: "Bless you both!" Modesta shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly. The tiny pantomime between them was silent and almost imperceptible. . . .

(2)

Once in their bedroom, she let herself drop, voluptuously tired, into the big armchair in front of the fire. She murmured: "Lorenzo!" and awaited the onslaught of his wooing. She would be seductive with a ripple of shyness all along the crescendo . . . and then, with the relief of a bather who on a dark hot night casts off the last shred of clothing, she would be just Modesta, Modesta herself, no one but Modesta.

Laurie was tempted. And Laurie sternly checked temptation. For Modesta had been slighted, and he was determined to amend this before the slight swelled to insult and spoilt the whole of their life together. He had promised Modesta that they should be equals, and he had promised the same level ecstasy to himself. It happened that this was the very first time that, absorbed in the interest of his battle with his mother and Nick, he had forgotten to include

Modesta, but had let her remain as though she were in truth the pretty trinket of a vulgarian wedded to him for one purpose alone. Therefore this first time was significant. . . . He sat on the rug beside Modesta, and started the laborious task of telling her, speaking slowly and clearly and patiently so that she could understand every word, what their discussion had been about; what were the pros and cons, where he stood in it, and where Nick, and where Belmont . . . and where Adam and Eve.

Every now and then he was punctilious to demand her views on the matter.

Modesta was at first utterly incredulous. Surely no man could be so mighty a fool? Was he blind? Was he deaf? Was he wooden? Was he everything but dumb? Then, as he insistently demanded her opinion of these stupid, stupid questions, contempt hardened the curve of her lips. She said: "*Si, si*, Lorenzo!" and "You are right; but yes, you are certainly right!" and she said it several times, whenever his pauses and inflections made it clear that such assurances were required.

But at last she yawned, and did not conceal it.

At sight and sound of her yawn, Laurie grew obstinate. Lazy little ruffian—so she would not bother to understand that he was throwing open a second kingdom for their mutual exploring! And the fact that

his instincts had agreed with hers, that for the moment such explorings were futile, aggravated his obstinacy. Damn it, he *would* have an intelligent answer from her! Her spirit should be rammed into shape to fit his chivalrous ideals, whether she liked it or not. He was heartily sick of the whole debate; nor did it matter a pin's head whether or not Eve had been morally responsible for the murder of Cain. But as he had mastered his recent impulse to kiss Modesta, to kiss her vehemently, kiss away her breath, so now he mastered the impulse to slap her into mental activity. He would be gentle, he would be kind, he would be understanding. . . . Laurie went on and on, being understanding. For the fourth time, and rising to go into the adjoining bathroom, he asked her whether she thought it unpardonable that a mother should back a favourite child through thick and thin? Or whether she should always strive to behave as though the impossible convention were true, that every Eve loves Cain and Abel both exactly alike? He left the door open between the two rooms, so that he might hear her answer. . . . "What did you say, darling?" he called out.

"I am thinking, I," replied Modesta's voice.

He heard her little pattering movements, opening and closing cupboard doors. Undressing herself, no doubt. Presently he called out again: "Modesta!"

"Si, si, si!"

Yes, but what had she got to be triumphant about? He could swear that she sounded triumphant.

Slipping into his dressing-gown, Laurie returned to the bedroom.

It was in a state of ludicrous disorder.

At first he could not quite gather what had happened, nor what was that mound in the centre of the carpet?

"What the hell . . ."

Busy little Modesta had been hard at work. The doors of his boot-cupboard were flung wide open; his boots and his shoes lurching tipsily in every direction. She had tugged out all the trees, deliberately, and not in a whirl of fury. Deliberately, she had jumbled the trees together, so that it must needs take Laurie some time to sort each pair out of chaos and refit them back into their places. She was not in the least sorry. On the contrary, that was the way Modesta answered abstract questions at a stupid, oh, so stupid time for such questions.

(3)

Laurie stood for a moment in silence, looking from Modesta to the pile of boot-trees, and from the pile of boot-trees back to Modesta. Then he threw back his head and shouted with laughter. The whole scene

struck him as being so ridiculous that he immediately wanted to tell Nick and his mother about it. . . .

"We could hear you guffawing through seven walls!" said Nick. "What's the joke?"

Laurie told them. To his surprise, Nick looked at him quizzically, and said: "Yes, damn funny. But what did you do, my Hercules?"

"Do?"

"Yes, when you came in and saw the trick she had played on you?"

"I laughed!" said Laurie. "Heavens, man, what else *was* there to do? You didn't expect me to get all worked up about it? It amused me."

"It shouldn't have. Good-night . . . Lorenzo."

Laurie stared, his eyes very blue, his red hair touzled, his brows scowling in perplexity. He remarked at last: "I always thought you had a sense of humour!" and marched off to his bedroom.

"A servant when she reigneth . . ." suggested Nick.

Belmont, ignoring this, murmured, "Poor Modesta . . . how right she was to be revenged!"

"That marriage is not going to be a success. Why were you so pleased with it?" And he answered himself: "Because she brought Laurie back again, when for the first time you thought you had lost him. Now

you possess them both. And things are going wrong—oh, I smelt it before to-night.”

Belmont again went to the window, pulled aside the curtains, and opened the doors on to the balcony. “It’s a heavenly night,” she said. One hand was still lifted, holding the brocade folds. To Nick Lepuy, lover of plays, she recalled all the ladies of Shakespeare . . . some intangible quality in the tilt of her head, in the cut and outline of her tight bodice and full skirt, bronze-green, in the way her hand looped up the curtain. . . .

“‘In Belmont is a lady richly left’ . . .” He broke off, deriding picturesque sentiment. “Just as well for Laurie that it should be so, isn’t it, *ma mère?*”

Belmont replied, without turning her head towards him: “Just as well it has been, at times, for you too, *mon fils.*”

He remembered, as she had without mercy meant him to remember, that she it was who had persuaded Dr. Ferrier to bring him away from the farm outside Carey Town, to bring him to Europe. Her own wealth, for the doctor had none, had educated him; sent him to Paris to study his art.

“You’ve made an architect of Laurie. How’s he getting on? Is he keen?”

He, too, seemed to discard one subject and pick up another without any apparent connection between

them. Their talk was often like this. Talk between enemies is often like this.

"Why do you ask me, when you have already asked Laurie himself?"

"You are quite right, Belmont. I have."

"What did he say?"

"Surely," Nick mocked, "surely you are in his confidence?"

She conceded a point or two. "As much in his confidence as anyone else. Laurie's confidence is like a public museum; open on Sundays, too."

Nick came and stood beside her on the balcony. Her last speech had won friendliness. But he knew it would not last.

"He is as happy, being an architect, as anything else." And she consulted him, charmingly: "Don't *you* think so?"

"Yes, yes, in a way. If you lifted him off his present job and put him to any other, he'd go on just as cheerfully. In fact, I believe, Belmont, he would hardly notice. I've never heard of Laurie throwing himself into anything with the same ardour and genius since that rag at the university. It's curious."

"I wish I had seen him impersonating the Russian Messiah. You think, then, that Laurie, like you, should have gone on the stage?"

“He didn’t want to, did he?”

It was plain that Belmont did not feel their present line of talk was dangerous, so she pursued it, as though in thankfulness. “No. He didn’t even belong to the O.U.D.S.”

“Odd! Nor the South-West Kensington Amateur Dramatic Society?”

Belmont laughed. “Not even that! Not even ‘The Bathroom Door’!”

But Nick, perhaps because he detected the relief in her laugh, chose this moment to swing her back, ruthlessly, to kiss the very lips of peril.

“When are you going to tell him, Belmont? Isn’t he old enough? Grown-up and married, and not old enough yet, Belmont?”

Love-in-a-mist? Flame-in-a-mist. Fire seen through frosted glass. Sunset burning behind a thin haze of cloud.

. . . Belmont’s reply, after a long silence, was not spoken to Nick. She wished into darkness, into the shadowed blocks of houses, into the rich sapphire of the sky and the colourless muffled space of the gardens, she wished that Nick had not come to London, had not come to her home, would go away soon and not return for a long time. She wished it aloud.

Nick cried out, bitterly: “You’ve done your best to

push me out, and to keep me out, and not let me in again. Why were you such a darling to me—oh, Belmont, why were you such a darling when I was a boy, and you brought me to England, when you might have left me on the farm?”

CHAPTER V

(1)

As though Nick's departure had stimulated new energy in Modesta to lord it over others, and especially over those whom she supposed to be weaklings, she became more swiftly a tyrant. Her husband did not ill-use her nor make her work, so she concluded it must be because he had not sufficient strength to do so. She exploited his desire to please her, in the shameless way that a child will exploit the fond love of a mother or a nurse, in order to demonstrate to another child its own mysterious power. Nick, although he was not there, was the other child in this case. The peasant girl felt impelled to score off the peasant boy; and all Laurie's love was an irritation because it had failed her before an audience of Nick and Belmont, on the night of the performance of "Eve."

Moreover, Modesta's existence as an English *signora* had ceased to be tentative and wary; she felt safe by now; she had learnt, so she thought, all the tricks and graces, and had learnt them amazingly well. Now, throughout the winter, she would settle

down and enjoy them: her servants, her cheque-book, her account at the Biggest Shop, her kid gloves and her visiting cards, incredulous had she been told that it was none of these grand possessions, but her prettiness, her fundamental good sense, her funny, sedate, self-possessed ways, that lifted her into success with the Ferriers' friends. Still less could she ever have guessed that they actually considered it *chic* that she had been a serving-maid. *Chic*, however, was not the current word. Laurie's marriage was looked upon as quite too marvellously unique, and also as good fun!

Good fun, yes, for Modesta, heady and exultant with the glib fulfilment of her dream. As a matter of course, now, she accepted her throne and her sceptre. As her father, Borello, repeated over and over again the word "*Io—I—I!*" with every variety of inflection that could suggest prostration in front of a miracle, so his second daughter might have whispered: "Modesta, Modesta!" gazing, rapt, on this Modesta who had only to wish to be a queen, an English *signora*, an indolent pampered wife, and all these things came true about her.

. . . Wonder, too, faded. And the first silver dress became merely "that old rag! I have worn it three times, I, and it is no more *alla moda*. In the spring I go to Paris with *la madre*. London," added Modesta, "London is never the same as Paris for clothes."

"It hasn't got the same *cachet*, has it, darling?" suggested Laurie, with a grin.

Modesta, storing up the strange word for future use, replied grandiloquently: "That is just what I said!"

Laurie passed on the joke to Belmont, who reflected that Nick—who had no sense of humour—might easily have placed it in the same category as the boot-tree incident, a category where laughter was out of place. But she smiled and remained silent, because she personally had no grudge against Modesta, the child who had brought Laurie back to her as a dependent once again in need of her help, after he had had the temerity to break away. Besides, Modesta continued to adore Belmont for having received her on terms of equality; which was strange, because the same gift from Laurie scratched up all her nerves to mutiny and secret contempt. But then she appreciated that this reception was the culmination of all possible bounty from Belmont, whereas from Laurie . . . she was justified in asking more.

"Are you really taking her to Paris, mother? Or was she just throwing her weight about?"

"I promised long ago I'd take her. You too."

Laurie looked doubtful. "I'm not sure if I can get away for odd holidays like that."

"Oh, I think the firm can spare you. I'll speak to Francis Groome about it."

Francis Groome was the senior partner of Messrs. Groome, Hemingway and Waters.

"They can spare me; rather. Good Lord, yes. I'm not such a blooming marvel that customers leap away to a rival firm directly they find I'm not on the spot. Only . . ."

"Only what, Laurie?"

He hesitated. "The *bambina* is a bit extravagant, you know, mother."

"You surely won't forbid me the pleasure of treating you both?"

"That's just it!" he burst out. "You're giving us everything, you know. I mean, if I'd been on my own legs, if you weren't buying me a partnership, I'd have been junior clerk or something with Groome, Hemingway and Waters. And if you hadn't spoken to Groome, because he's a friend of yours, I'd get a fortnight's holiday every year, and that would be an end of it. And Modesta and I live luxuriously in your flat, at your expense, and . . . and, well, there you are! And now you're offering to take us to Paris."

Belmont tried to discover by scrutiny whether her son's pride were in active rebellion, or merely offering a conventional protest that could easily be overcome. She decided on the latter.

"Don't strut about and bang your head against walls and be independent, Laurie, darling. It's terribly tiring. I'm not denying myself anything for you, you know; not sacrificing my morning egg so that you should have two! There's plenty of money, and you're my only son. You're my only son," she repeated.

"And you do like Modesta, don't you? Really like her? I've not let you down over that?"

"Modesta? She's adorable, and clever as a little ape! I can't help being flattered; she copies me blind. She copies even my subtleties, Nick says, whatever they are. . . . But my daughter-in-law copies them on trust."

"You think she's quite happy?" Laurie frowned, as though the sound of his own question had raised a doubt. "Now and then she seems a bit discontented—especially since that night when we gave her the prairie oyster, Nick and I. You don't think, do you, mother, that that really upset her? It was only a rag."

No, Belmont did not think that the incident of the prairie oyster had really upset Modesta. . . .

"Paris! Then we'll see Nick again, sooner than we expected?" Laurie's tones expressed hearty satisfaction.

"No, no, it's bad luck, but I'm afraid Nick won't be in Paris during March. The tour of 'Eve' begins in the middle of January, he said."

"Oh damn! Couldn't we go earlier, then? I don't want to miss Nick."

"*Earlier?* My dear Laurie, what would be the good of going to Paris before the spring models are ready?"

Laurie made the usual masculine sounds appropriate to such sentiments. But his mother was paying for the whole show, so he felt bound to leave the matter of dates to her. He said, however, with some force, that he wished Nick could have become an English instead of a French actor. As he was bi-lingual, it would have been purely a matter of training. "Why did you let him choose the Conservatoire? It means we hardly ever see him."

"Nick didn't choose it. I did."

"Mother! Why? You often say how rotten it is, not seeing more of Nick. Why on earth couldn't you let him go on the stage in England?"

"Unselfishness," confessed Belmont, with a faint smile. "I saw that he had the Gallic temperament, which might not have been a success over here. Nick would have hated not to be a success. Now you, Laurie, you don't seem to care!"

"*'Cromwell-I-charge-thee-fling-away-ambition!'*" said Laurie, all in one breath, flinging away his cigarette with a noble sweep of his arm.

"Don't you really care?"

"Oh, rather, I care like anything. I finished map-

ping out a pretty useful town hall this morning. One day, if it's ever built, you must come and see it."

"Sometimes you seem to me sorry that you didn't choose another profession. Sometimes I think that, like Nick, you'd have been happiest on the stage."

"You're wrong, then."

"That 'varsity rag——"

His eyes sparkled with retrospective amusement. "But a real actor gets no fun out of acting."

"Why, Laurie?"

"They're found out from the very beginning. In fact, they declare themselves. 'Hamlet,' Nicholas Lepuy, it says on the programme. No attempt made to spoof the audience that Nicholas Lepuy really *is* Hamlet. Where's the fun or the credit of that?"

"'Spoof,' as you call it, is rather a low-down form of acting, surely?"

"Is it? I don't know. . . . It doesn't matter, anyhow."

(2)

They went to Paris in March. And found Nick there, after all. "Eve" had not been a success in the provinces, and the tour had hardly lasted six weeks. He was now idle, and glad to spend a large part of his time with his family when they arrived.

"What luck!" exclaimed Laurie. For those women,

he knew, would hardly ever be out of the dressmakers' salons; and he and Nick would be free to do what they liked.

Not altogether, however. Modesta sometimes insisted that her husband should accompany her, ostensibly to pass an opinion on the creation that was being built for her. She liked having the Prince Consort in attendance. She liked, too, that Neeck should witness the Prince Consort's devotion.

One day, after she had had a fitting of an evening dress tinted like foam and the inside of a sea-shell, at Maison Pensé-Lajeune, Madame Lajeune begged her to inspect two or three superb models that she was sure Madame would appreciate—and Monsieur, too, indicating Laurie, looking very burly and outside the picture, planted squarely on a sofa amid her delicate colour-schemes of pigeon and grape-green. The models were duly paraded. Modesta languidly asked that one of them should reappear for a second inspection. The same girl, a supple brunette type, reappeared, but wearing the wrong frock. Madame had gone away to the distant end of the salon to welcome some other clients, who were not far removed from royalty. The desertion rather annoyed Modesta. Those other clients were being received, so it seemed to her, with more *empressement* than was in accordance with her own vanities. The mistake also annoyed her, because it

meant that she had to linger while the girl changed, and miss another appointment, and a profitable one, with Belmont, who was going to buy her a new evening cloak. And they only had two more days in Paris.

The mannequin who had dared mistake Modesta's murmured commands had a bad headache, and had recently mislaid her lover. Also, at sight of Modesta, a sudden antipathy had flown into her heart, and remained there, agitated, like the beating of wings. Therefore she contradicted Modesta, saying haughtily that the frock she had put on again was the identical one which Modesta had stated she had wanted to reconsider.

Modesta did not understand French, but she realised that she was being contradicted. *Dio!* And by one little better than a servant, one who had to do what she was told, one who could not lie back imperially among cushions on sofas, pigeon and grape-green. She muttered something in Italian.

At once the mannequin flamed back in Italian too. *Accidente!* Was she not from Torino herself? Instinct had made her suspect Modesta from the beginning; but directly this sham *signora* spoke her own tongue, she *knew*. . . .

Suddenly it seemed to Laurie as though he were back again in the cool cave of the Rices' dining-room at Santa Nucia, and into the midst of his repose had

sprung a cacophony of sound, the terrible clash and jangle of a quarrel, as though a hundred female voices had abruptly broken tether, and were being swirled around and around, pent within a space too small for emotion; savage, screaming voices, freed of all control . . . and more particularly one voice that harshly scrambled on top of the others.

Modesta's voice.

Little Modesta, Borello's daughter, Modesta the serving-maid at Villa Luceola, was thoroughly enjoying herself. So was Caterina Amoretti, daughter of Amoretti Giovanni, who owned a *pasticceria* in Turin. From both of them, under provocation, the veneer of civilisation had disappeared; control had been ripped asunder. It was glorious, there in the well-bred salon of Maison Pensé-Lajeune, to rage, to scream and gesticulate at each other in the unrestrained style to which they were both accustomed. Of the two, Modesta's screams were the most piercing, though Caterina had the greater range of invective. But as neither was actually listening to the other, this hardly counted. And Laurie, and the other saleswomen and mannequins, and Madame Lajeune, who had hurried up to this outrageous scene of conflict, and the clients who were very nearly royalty, enjoying the spectacle from the far end of the salon, could none of them grasp what was being said, nor what had released the waterspout,

the volcano; nor that Modesta, her body taut, her arms carving the air, every separate black hair quivering with electric vitality, was the more likely victor of the encounter. The air about them was flashing as with knives turning in strong sunlight. . . .

And then it was all over. Prone on the carpet, on the Pensé-Lajeune carpet, lay Caterina in hysterics. Modesta's anger subsided. Laurie, stunned by the shock of discovering Rosina's innocence, last June, forced himself back into the present, and escorted Modesta downstairs to the waiting car—Modesta, sedate and decorous again, but with a gleam under her half-closed eyelids.

(3)

They were silent on their way back to the hotel. Modesta was feeling refreshed and fit for anything. But she was not quite sure of Lorenzo's line of action. Lorenzo was a foreigner and therefore irresponsible. . . . She saw that his lips were white, and that his brows were drawn together in some deep perplexity.

Actually, Laurie's thoughts on the scene he had just witnessed were strange even to himself. For he found that his grief was inside out, and that he was passionately, guiltily regretting, not that the Modesta of English civilisation had become a natural little savage,

but that ever the natural Modesta had become smooth and English and civilised. He must have been feeling this for months without in the least realising it . . . until, in reminder, she had flashed again before his vision as though she were standing in some steep little cobbled street of black shadows sliced with brilliant sunshine; the shops gay with heaped-up fruits, red and gold and green; beyond an archway, the shimmering sea; up beyond the town, vineyards and olive groves, and one black cypress nearly as tall as the *campanile*; and a faint whiff of garlic blowing down the alley; and laughing men and girls, bareheaded, with brown skins, lounging round to watch the quarrel, shrill partisans, laughing, gesticulating. . . . Modesta in a blaze, and Caterina raging back at her . . . all of them so happy down there in Italy, where language ran freely as wine, and nobody was surprised or shocked. Yes, that was the Modesta whom he had thought to "rescue." False romanticism! He owed her a rescue, now, more urgent and more difficult—and far less pleasant for Modesta!

She sat beside him, quiet, sheathed, beautifully dressed, her hat folded back like wings to frame her inscrutable childish face. She was wearing suède gloves and suède shoes and a fur coat, all in tender grey. An expensive, wholly artificial Modesta. Modesta spoilt. The car, Belmont's car, ran smoothly, carrying

them to the hotel where they lived sybaritically as Belmont's guests.

God! How had he dared meddle? How had he dared do these things to her?

Then he said: "Modesta, we are going back to Italy."

"It is not the season," rejoined Modesta, coolly.

"There will be no seasons," answered Laurie, dispensing in an Olympian manner with seed-time and harvest. "I mean to live in Italy."

Modesta said no.

"No no no no no no *no!*" cried Modesta in a rapid crescendo. He was behaving—not like Lorenzo. Unhappy. Not like Lorenzo. What was wrong?

Live in Italy? *Dio*, no! But it was a pity that Lorenzo should have been at Maison Pensé-Lajeune with her a few moments ago. She had enjoyed her merry, innocent little encounter with Caterina, and an Italian husband would have enjoyed it too, and fondled her for her victory. But, it is true, she had not seen the English *signora*, Belmont, or any of her friends behaving thus. So she went up to Laurie and slipped penitent arms confidently round his neck, and asked him if he had a headache. Or why was he cross with her? And whether she was to wear the frock that he liked best, that night, because they were going to dine at Marguery? She added that she liked dining at Marguery

because it was so *chic*, and yet none of the men there was as handsome as Lorenzo. . . .

"That sort of coaxing is a bit primitive!" said Laurie. "It's no good, Modesta, all this rubbish about frocks and the season and the *chic* places to dine. It's over as far as we are concerned. You poor kid, I ought never to have dragged you into it. We'll settle in Italy, somewhere near Santa Nucia. You'd like to go home, wouldn't you, Modesta?"

"My home is in London."

Laurie smiled. "Don't you believe it, my child. Have you ever heard of the something-or-other that dressed itself up in peacock's feathers, and nearly everybody else thought it was a peacock? But it was-n't."

Modesta crossed the room and stood in front of the cheval glass. Her hands stroked down the soft squirrel of her coat. But yes, certainly she had adjusted herself to look like a true *signora*. Then let Laurie talk his stupid nonsense for a little while longer. . . . He had not the force to make her do what she did not want to do. He loved her; he was weak; he was her slave. She remained standing in front of the long mirror with its side-panels that showed three Modestas—four, counting herself—all elegant, all admirably dressed and wearing gloves. And what could Lorenzo do against four Modestas?

He went on, aware of her mute opposition. "I'm not scolding you, Modesta. That was a filthy row at Pensé-Lajeune's just now, and I was horribly ashamed, but I deserved it for having all those idiotic notions about you never soiling your hands with work again, and all the rest of it. Oh, we needn't go to extremes, but we can live quite simply, and you can have one servant, perhaps."

"I thank you *infinitely*," said Modesta.

"Why did you marry me?" Laurie asked her suddenly.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Did you love me?"

"I do not know, I."

"You *must* know!"

"*Ebbene*, and why did you marry me? It was not sense!"

"I married you to give you everything you wanted."

But that was beyond Modesta's understanding, so she did not believe him. Chivalry, a boyish desire to help somebody escape from circumstances, to achieve a golden benevolence on a colossal, a quixotic scale, such actions were alien to her traditions. Flamboyant speeches, but actions that were prudently dictated by self-preservation, to these her mankind had accustomed her, not the reverse. She believed that a man would only marry her to get everything *he* wanted—and only

if there were no other way. And Lorenzo—she summed up—Lorenzo was a bad bargainer. How could she respect one who immediately and without question paid the highest price of all for a piece of property? . . . and even then did not avail himself of its full value! . . . Modesta remembered the night of “Eve” and the boot-trees. *Ma!*

Laurie was feeling very young and very disconsolate. It was not done, to keep on reminding Modesta of all the benefits he had showered upon her, and yet he could not help doing what was not done, in the vain hope of cuddling her down into a mood of sweet gratitude.

So he repeated: “I did try, you know, to give you everything you wanted.”

Modesta’s lips curved disdainfully. “Then, pliss, we will go on with that. And of this idea to live in Italy, *basta*, enough! Live with one domestic, I? I should be ill, very ill. I am not robust. I should die.”

But Laurie’s mind was ploughing heavily back to a previous phrase of hers. “What did you mean, ‘it was not sense’ that I married you?”

Modesta had all the superb gifts for imparting language without speech which belong to a race doubly gifted in volubility. She gave him, now, a twitch of the shoulder, a slither of insolence down her small slim body, a flicker of the eyelids . . . enough for

Laurie. He understood that Modesta might or might not have yielded to him when he sought her by the well where the wild rose twisted through the fig tree. . . . But that she had thought him ridiculous for making her his wife without at least once trying to elude such a conclusion to his wooing . . .

He repeated slowly: "It was not sense . . ." And then, almost in a whisper: ". . . Back to Italy."

At the whisper, Modesta was transformed for the second time into a raging little bully. But she did not meet Laurie on equal ground, as Caterina; for he was not her equal; he was weak and a fool and an Englishman. So she dictated her orders. "I will not go back to Italy. I will stay in Paris as long as I like, and I will have as many frocks as I like, and I will be *chic*, and have many domestics, and another fur coat, two, three, and, yes, a house of my own in Londra, as big as a palace, if I choose. Only I will not go back to Londra the day after to-morrow, as it was agreed. No no no no! You will take me to Monte Carlo instead, for it is gay there until the end of March, so they all tell me, and there are the finest toilettes and much society, and it will be in the papers that I, Mrs. Laurence Fay-ree-air, have gone there with my husband, because that is the *chic* place to go. It is I that will say, I, and always I, what we are to do, for you told me, yes, I remember, after Rosina and I had our little

dispute in the kitchen and I ran out and you followed me, you told me that in England and in America the ladies are all princesses, and the men are *stupido*, and have nothing to say. It is no good that you talk to me of your work—I have heard Neeck say that if you work or if you do no work, the work remains the same! Neeck, he always laughs at me, but he is to see now! And *la madre*, she will give us the money. She is rich, and she adores me, and she will be glad that I should go to Monte Carlo and have a little holiday and a little pleasure, because Paris has been so very exhausting, and I am all upset now, so I will repose upon my bed, and you, Lorenzo, you will go *subito*, *subito*, at once to *la madre*, and tell her that we travel to Monte Carlo!”

And Modesta threw her hat upon the floor between them as though in challenge, and hurled her coat towards Laurie for him to hang it up, and dropped upon the couch and lay there, supine, in a martyred pose and in complete contentment. Deliberately, she was sending Belmont’s son to Belmont, because she seemed to remember that *la madre* had long ago made her a promise—yes, surely a promise—of alliance in a crisis.

Laurie hung up her coat for her, clumsily but carefully. Then, without looking in her direction, he said:

"All right, I'll go and talk to mother," and went out of the room.

(4)

He went straight down to Belmont's private sitting-room, where he found her alone and doing nothing. She had waited a short while for Modesta at their appointment, and then, unperturbed, had returned to the hotel. It was strange how often one found Belmont doing nothing, considering the multiplicity of social and cultured interests on which she lightly touched but never fastened herself. Sometimes it seemed as though through a mirror she were watching the pageant trooping on behind her back, and that the brittle mirror must break before she could achieve thrilling contact. Laurie hated fussy mothers, busy mothers, mothers who were always pulling curtains about, or ostentatiously twitching at a fellow's tie to put it straight. He had seen mothers like that; many of his friends had them. His own mother, apparently, possessed him and possessed his life without any cuddling intimacy; there was ample room to swing a cat in the clear spaces which she left around him before they were rimmed by her invisible prisoning circles. So that now he neither felt that Belmont was the very first person in the world to whom he must impetuously rush and tell his story, nor the very last person in the world

whose sympathy or questioning he could endure. Curiously, only son of a woman early widowed, he went to her as a matter of habit, of expedience.

"I've just had a devil of a row with Modesta."

Belmont had been prepared for this. Rows were inevitable, and sometimes healthy. But looking up at Laurie, she saw that he had suffered an emotional shock of some sort. What could Modesta have done to shock him?

She waited, saying nothing.

"We were at Pensé-Lajeune's trying on a dress or something, and she got impatient with one of the mannequins, who turned out to be an Italian too, and they both went native and jabbered and screamed and had a jolly good time."

But Belmont saw that not there had been the shock, that sick reeling of the soul which she suspected in him.

"Was this the first time, Laurie, that you had seen Modesta in a passion? She comes of a hot-blooded race, you must remember; and all this while, though she has behaved perfectly, she's only been imitating me."

"Imitating *you*? Yes, I know."

"I'm fond of her," murmured Belmont, speaking truly.

"She's crazy about you. No, it's not the first, but the

second time I've heard her lose control and rave. Only, the first time, she was in the kitchen, and I was in the dining-room, and I thought it was her sister."

"And when she broke out at Pensé-Lajeune's, you realised that it wasn't? I *am* so sorry, dear. But your lives aren't shattered, you know. These tempers will grow less and less. You can't expect, in the first year, that she will think and feel like an English vicar's daughter!" But she was still waiting for Laurie to tell her what had really happened so to excruciate him, between the scene at the dressmaker's and his appearance now in her sitting-room.

Laurie, however, crossed from one event to the other in a stride.

"Oh, I'm not being unreasonable. It's all right, really. Only she wants to go to Monte Carlo, instead of back to London, the day after to-morrow."

Belmont laughed softly. "Little wretch! She heard the Comtesse talking to Lucille Somerset about the season at Monte Carlo, and she hopes to get in for the climax and the end of it. London's too tame for her."

"I expect so," Laurie agreed grimly. "Quiet little spot, London, after Santa Nucia! Still, I've got to get back to my job."

"It's not so urgent, is it? Why not give the child her

fling? A fortnight at Monte Carlo would be a *beau geste* before going home."

"*Beau geste!*" exclaimed Laurie incredulously. "Why the hell should I make a *beau geste*? Or a *beau* anything? I'm not the offender!"

"You're not a policeman either, my son!"

"Are you going to back her up?" Laurie demanded. ✓ "She seemed to think, somehow, that you might. That's why I came straight here, to warn you."

"Warn me? We're getting more and more solemn! You're a magistrate now."

"Are you going to back her up?" he asked again. "You've treated us to Paris. Now she expects you to treat us to Monte Carlo. My lady wife is getting a bit exacting in her demands. Clothes and pleasure, that's about all she thinks of from morning to night, and I'm to follow her about, meek and submissive, carrying her fur coat."

Belmont's reaction from this outburst of the conventional male was inimical. She was an American, and in her heart she believed, as Laurie had once told Modesta, that women were princesses and should walk on velvet, idolised by their men. If this silly boy of hers were to bang about in masterful attitudes, to assert himself, to shout that "he wasn't going to have it!" he would speedily become a bore both to Modesta and to herself. Therefore the tendency must at once be met

with a strong though invisible check. Garnett Ferrier had worshipped her; so had her father, Centaur B. Ashe, while he lived. If Laurie should abruptly attempt to lord it over his wife, presently he would attempt to lord it over his mother. They would possess him no longer, she and Modesta; he would possess them, or one of them, the one he wanted more; the other he would just allow to drift. . . .

It had been very little sacrifice to share Laurie with Modesta. But now, she smelled that a wind was blowing up . . . and she could not orientate it. There might be separation now. She was losing control. Her son was on the verge of escape. He had nearly escaped before, but Modesta had led him back, and Modesta had given her promise that she would always lead Laurie back. . . .

All this rippled through her mind—while she looked thoughtfully at Laurie, as though impartially considering the situation, as though preparing to give him the mellow results of her experience.

“Well, mother?”

“I think you’re wrong, Laurie. This isn’t the moment to be harsh and dictatorial. If you take Modesta straight back to London, she will look on it as a sort of punishment, because of what she did at Pensé-Lajeune’s. And that, after all, was nature breaking out, and shouldn’t be punished.”

"I know that. Well?"

Why did he keep on saying "Well?" to her? With apparent nonchalance, Belmont shifted her weight more and more to Modesta's side. "Puppy teeth are mischievous. They crave living stuff to bite on. She won't forgive you if you punish her where she isn't really to blame. But if you indulge her now in her whim, take her to Monte Carlo, then in her heart she'll be terribly grateful, and terribly ashamed of herself, and you won't have any more scenes. I'm beginning to understand my daughter-in-law. She's wilful, but very, very lovable. I think you'll have to take her to Monte Carlo, Laurie. It shan't cost you anything, of course. I won't go there, myself. Another honeymoon . . ."

. . . As though indeed she were pouring honey from a jar, slow, thick honey, and waving moonlight before his eyes. But it was not quite real from Belmont, as it might have been from some elderly, silly, white-haired sentimentalist.

Abruptly, without another word, Laurie departed.

Impossible to tell how her counsels affected him. She had always taken Laurie's temperament very much for granted. One does not explore a region when one is convinced that there are no perils in it. Other mothers among her friends had envied her the bringing-up of Laurie, with his charming, kind, gen-

erous nature, his genial popularity, his capacity for enjoying life without cavil. But—what had *happened*, besides that scene in the atelier of Maison Pensé-Iajeune? It was not her way to seek information. When it came to her, she would know how to manipulate it with all the brilliant subtle art of an initiate to witchcraft, which after all is no more than worldcraft; but hitherto she had always found that there was no need for her to go out and seek for what was happening.

So she sat, waiting for Modesta.

Presently, still supposing that Modesta might at any moment come to her for solace and help, Belmont went to her own room and dressed for the dinner-party. It was shortly after seven o'clock that the information was telephoned through to her that Monsieur Lepuy had arrived, and was waiting in her sitting-room. And because she did not especially wish that Nick should have private speech with either Laurie or Modesta on the very rim of crisis, she quickly finished her toilet and went down to him. But how like Nick, again and again to be before time with his appointments where she was concerned . . . almost as though he wished to catch her unawares. It had been agreed casually that he was to call for them at about a quarter to eight.

“Nick! Have you rung for cocktails, dear?”

"No, not yet. I like drinking in good company."

She ordered them. And then asked him if he had seen Laurie.

"No. Yes. No . . . why?"

"Why did you say 'yes'?"

"Well, it's funny, but I thought I caught a glimpse of him on my way here, sitting outside a café."

"*Thought?* Dear Nick, don't you know Laurie by sight?"

"Because I do know Laurie so well by sight, I thought I might have been mistaken. The man at the café looked like him, but different . . . brooding. Laurie is not one to brood. And anyhow the light shone only on one side of his face, and I was in a taxi, and did not stop. It was raining, too."

"*And* you didn't want to be late?" Belmont supplemented, softly striking.

He smiled. "The Man who was Always too Early! —You must admit, Belmont, that it is a unique title. Laurie has quarrelled with Modesta?"

"Yes. She suddenly went native, he says, in Pensé-Lajeune's salon. But how did you guess?"

"One doesn't need to be a clairvoyant to see that. Let us hope that Laurie will show up as a first-class caveman."

Belmont shook her head. "We always hope by contraries, you and I."

"True. You, no doubt, have been advising him to become a first-class Aubusson carpet."

"Your guess-work is always excellent . . . and your deductions impudent."

Nick bowed. "As always, *ma mère*."

The door opened, and Laurie came in.

(5)

But not the Laurie, half-angry, half-bewildered, argumentative, rushing to headlong decisions, mysteriously wounded, spasmodically conventional, who had confronted Belmont not half an hour ago. This Laurie walked as though he were numb and beaten; his clothes were sopping wet, and yet he appeared not to have noticed it. His eyes were cast down; his arms hung limply; his voice was flat and monotonous. . . .

"I just looked in on my way up," he said. "Hello, Nick. Is it as late as that? I suppose I must get dressed. I just looked in on my way up. I wanted to tell you——" He turned his body towards Belmont, but she could not see his eyes. His manner worried her.

"Yes, darling?" gently.

"You were quite right. About Modesta, I mean. About Monte Carlo. Of course, if she wants to go, I'll

take her. Of course I will. I'll see about our reservations to-morrow, so that we can start the day after." He paused, irresolute whether to add more or go away. He took a step nearer Belmont. "You're pleased with me? I know I sounded like a brute before, but since then I've been thinking. You know; not doing anything, but thinking it over. One can't be a brute, not to one's wife, when she wants things. And Modesta frightfully wants to go to Monte Carlo." But yet, though he repeated: "I must go and get dressed now," he seemed not to have the initiative to urge himself out of the room.

Nick took him by the shoulder kindly, and pushed him out. "Hurry up, old man, we're waiting. See you presently." Then he shut the door on him, and placed himself with his back against it, facing Belmont. "My God, what has happened to the boy?" His altered tone held her sharply responsible.

"Not my fault," Belmont pleaded, a little breathlessly; for her spirit warned her that the next few minutes were going to be as difficult as swimming in water that was almost solid, choked and glutinous with old weed. "Not my fault, Nick."

"Yes. Your fault. The fault of your—your celluloid obsession! Everything is false. All his past is false; every feeling you pretend to have for him is distorted. He was brought up in a vacuum of shams.

And falseness spreads. Laurie himself—Laurie wasn't real just now."

"You think he was just posing? Not Laurie?"

Nick could not adequately explain that curious discomfort which Laurie's brief appearance had evoked in him; because he was a man who hated dim flowing shapes, vague outlines, misty sensations of something-I-don't-know-what. He tried to analyse it anew; it was not only that Laurie was in trouble and had seemingly surrendered to his trouble in an abject sort of fashion, but even the surrender was not quite straightforward; it was overstressed, and for their benefit. . . . "He could help it quite well if he liked!" Who had said that?

Suddenly Nick's brain had received its clue. He spoke more gravely, less in a stammer of temper. "He could have helped it if he liked, but this is familiar in Laurie: showing off. Even when he was a baby, when he used to hold his breath, and go on holding it just to frighten us all."

"Laurie? He didn't?"

Nick gave her a queer look. "Only during the first year of his life. His mother broke him of it. *You* wouldn't remember, Belmont."

They had not spoken of this openly for years.

And Belmont, who was Dr. Garnett Ferrier's sec-

ond wife, said: "Thank you, Nick. It's almost a relief, at last."

(6)

But Nick drove on with his accusation, not caring that her eyes were strained and her voice husky with apprehension. Nick was not seeing Belmont just then . . . but instead, a haunting memory of pretty Elena Rakonitz, dark-eyed and flushed like a fruit, who had been playmate and elder sister to the little French peasant boy on her parents' farm; until, loving and marrying while she was still so impetuously young, she had gone away from the farm to the doctor's house in Carey Town; and Nick had missed her, missed her dreadfully, and slipped off into the town to visit her whenever he could escape from his boring duties. Presently he had seen her with arms folded round her infant son, adoring him, tenderly teasing him, crooning to him in his slumber. Nick, aged nine, a precocious thin little boy with dancing eyes, terribly observant, was strangely impressed by this replica of a picture of mother and child; amazed, too, at the maturing, softening change in the girl who had romped with him on the farm where they had both been born. Nick was never jealous of Laurie. From the very first, the fair handsome baby, so unlike himself, fascinated him; especially when he showed his

fury at the gradual weaning from his mother's breasts by loud resentful yells, stiffening, red in the face, blue in the face. . . . "He could help it if he liked," said Elena, unperturbed. "Young rascal! darling little rogue!—horrid little beast, as though I wouldn't know the difference if he were really in pain!" . . . And she hugged Laurie and laughed at him, and laughed over at Nick. . . . He could almost imagine an edge of radiance settling around her, as she sat there in the porch of the doctor's house, with the child in her arms, rosy as an apple, even after defeat. He had seen paintings, later on, primitive scriptural paintings, that reminded him. . . . And sometimes, in these, the other older boy, too, was standing near by, in a sheepskin; or leaning up against the Madonna's knee. . . .

Elena had died when Laurie was hardly a year old, and she had only just triumphantly cured him of holding his breath.

Remembering, Nick wanted to be brutal to Belmont. A fine mother of Laurie, not even to have known about the child's first days and nights, each as precious to Elena as a pearl; pink pearl, black pearl, pink pearl. . . . It was during the daytime that Elena had died, which made it somehow crueller.

Nick's usual mocking acceptance of the situation snapped and gave way. He stormed at Belmont:

"Everything was wrong about Laurie! Of course it's your fault! One sham built on another. . . . His job is all wrong; his marriage is all wrong; his values are all false; Who can doubt it, when the whole structure is lies, and built on the most fundamental lie of all? You are *not* his mother, and something in him knows it; not his conscious self, but *something*. . . . Was he compelled to confess to you, just now, what he was up to? Not that his mother would have needed confession. Her instinct would have been enough. As it is, you're in the dark just as much as I am. You know nothing about the boy, Belmont, and you don't even love him!"

"He's my whole life," from Belmont, fighting him.

"No doubt. Yes. Because you possess him, or think you do! You'd like me to reckon up what you've given him? Good, I will. All nice, easy things: a house to live in, an education, a certainty of partnership in his profession, money to keep the wrong wife in the wrong style, and a nice short tether, so that he can run a little way and believe he is free. . . . And you think that's fair exchange for robbery?"

"Don't rant, Nick, don't rant!"

"How can I *not* rant? You've given me melodrama. You've robbed Laurie's mother. Or haven't you enough soul to imagine that perhaps she would have liked her son to remember her? He was her flesh and

her pain, and, now that she is dead, her only immortality. But you've made of her a handful of dust, something that stopped and is finished and forgotten for ever—while Laurie goes on as yours."

"Good curtain speech," murmured Belmont. But the tears were running swiftly down her face.

"Yes, isn't it? Well, you so kindly had me trained as an actor. Oh, Belmont"—his rage was dwindling now, but he had not thought of Elena for so long—"Belmont, Belmont, why did you do it? Why did you do it?"

". . . Why did I have you trained as an actor?"

"That answer I know," retorted Nick, contemptuous of her evasion. "You had to draw a second promise out of me somehow, to strengthen the first. Promise, *promise*. . . . And then you push me out of the house, out of the family, keep me away from Laurie. . . . Get rid of Nick! Nick knows! Nick is dangerous! Send him to France, then, at any cost! See him as rarely as possible, without Laurie suspecting. For nobody else knows but Nick, damn him!—How often have you damned me, Belmont, for being alive at all? for existing and knowing and tormenting you?"

"And yet——" Belmont spoke slowly, as in a reverie, her chin cupped in her hands, and the tears still streaming down her face. . . . Nick had never

before seen anyone cry like that, so silently. "And yet, if I had been utterly without conscience, without scruple, without kindness, need I have taken you with us when we sailed for Europe? I could have left you in Carey Town."

"I know," muttered Nick. "That's just it." He began to pace the room as though he were hoping to pace away perplexity. "That's where you have been such a wild, inconsistent, splendid-hearted *fool*—more than a fool; quite without reason; quite mad. You cared so much that Laurie should think of you as his mother, that the whole world should think of Laurie as your son, that you cut all heaven out of yourself, to succeed; you separated your new life from the old by a thousand miles of land and the width of the Atlantic. And then you actually were absurd enough to take with you one small, impertinent, unnecessary Nicholas, so that you are never free from a witness, and what a plague of a witness! So that every brilliant precaution in your scheme could have been annulled as soon as it was formed. Now wasn't that a fool's impulse, Belmont?" He smiled at her sunnily. The crackling hurricane was over. "Surely you would have been quieter and happier, less of a fool, to have adopted Laurie instead of claiming him? He'd have been your stepson. Just as

much yours, or more perhaps, than stolen to be your son."

So that was all Nick understood of her great unceasing fear of being thought sterile, a fear arid as the taste of sand in her throat. Was "adopted" an ointment to soothe such a smart? But Nick, with his reiterated: "*When* are you going to tell him, Belmont? You said you'd tell him when he was old enough. Isn't he old enough now? Not yet? Not now? *When*, then?—This year, next year, some time. . . ." Nick knew well enough that her answer would always be "Never!" Yet he had kept on, till, after four years of it, she had plugged him to silence with a second bargain: "If I send you to the Conservatoire, and pay for your training to become an actor. . . ." Poor Nick, he had wanted that so desperately that she could sympathise when he fell: "All right, all right. I promise, again, that I will not tell Laurie." But he had promised once already, out there in Carey Town: "I'll take you away from the farm, Nick. I'll take you to Europe, to England, to France, if you promise you won't tell Laurie that I'm not his own mother." Oh, not so crudely as that! She had smoothed and trimmed the rough edge of her desire: "You see, Nick, this is a thing that I must tell him myself, when he gets old enough. Of course I *will* tell him. Of course. But not yet. And you must promise. . . ."

But even with this assurance she had been mad to take him along. He was nothing to her, the grandson of some old French peasants who had emigrated and been taken on to the farm by Ignac Rakonitz and his wife, just out of charity, because their daughter, poor Marie . . . Well, all that had been before Belmont was concerned. Only Nick had pleaded so passionately. He was so bored, bored with the dreary prairie-land and those four dreary old people, his bereaved grandparents and their bereaved employers, the Rakonitz couple. He wanted life and cities and theatres; and he was such a quick, merry little fellow, spice on his tongue and the devil in his eyes. . . . She could not endure to leave him there to rot and grow dreary as well. And—he had actually taunted her with it!—one generous impulse, and her whole lie in jeopardy. Never mind, he had promised. And promised again. Every now and then she had to test these promises; a double cable, lest the one should break. She tested them uneasily. They were strong, they were resilient, they held. . . .

But how could a man understand her shame when she had been told, after her operation, that she could not have children of her own? her shame at being barren, when fecundity was the secret of the world? There were tribes that drove a woman out to die if she could not bear children. . . . When she bound

Nick by a promise, she had meant to tell Laurie some time, as late as possible, but some time she would have to. But even then a premonition had stirred in her that chance might make things easy, that chance might save her the telling. The ancient goddess of fruitfulness, of corn that sprang from the soil, would understand that if a woman were cursed, she might at least appear blessed. The fortunate goddess might help her, somehow. *She* could divine the pride that survives humiliation. . . . So through all these tortuous ways, Belmont had believed with utter simplicity that old spells, old magic had been worked in her favour, and so she was encouraged. They had permitted her to win a safeguard from Nicholas, just in case, in case she need never have to tell. They had permitted her husband to retire from his practice, to settle as far as might be from Carey Town, where everybody had known Elena, the dark Hungarian girl, his first wife. And then, even Belmont hardly dared to own that, still working for her, they had infected Dr. Ferrier with pneumonia, a couple of years after they had quitted America. And ever since, Laurie had been hers, wholly her property, her own son, passionately claimed, passionately encircled.

“Nick . . .”

“*Ma mère?*”

She quivered a little at the ironic stress. "Don't call me that."

"I was too old for you to put that over, at the time we met, wasn't I? What a pity! You might have had two sons!"

"A moralist always judges the quarter from where his benefits come. No wonder you played Adam so well, Nick."

He turned scarlet. "Don't spare me. Enter Second Murderer. He betrays First Murderer's secret."

"Your *promise!*" Belmont cried at last. As though a promise were God, and she contradicting her own despair by a final complete reliance.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Nick also called on his God, who was One that permitted the strangest, most preposterous incongruities to get loose in the world. "*Mon Dieu*—and you call Modesta naïve! You, hyper-civilised, a silver-point of sophistication. . . . And you lean on promises, find truth in secrets, help in superstitions, a mumbo-jumbo of taboo and legend, a farrago of spells and ancient jou-jou! If you can only make the tribe believe he is your son, then he *is* your son. . . ."

And softly, pitying his denseness, ironically pitying his struggles in the toughness of the web she had woven around him, Belmont agreed: "It's despicable, isn't it?"

"Despicable?" Impatiently he flung out his hands. "I don't know. I know there is no sense in it." It was odd that the phrase should again recall Modesta to his vision, not aware that she too had used it, not long ago. "Compared with you, Modesta is as sensible, as real, as useful as milk warm from the udder."

"Perhaps it is a pity that I didn't leave you on the farm," suggested his benefactress, coolly.

His eyes twinkled at the reproof to his coarseness. "True! I must suddenly have gone native—like Modesta!"

"*Ecco*—I am ready at last!" And Modesta tripped in, her eyes clear and innocent from the happy sleep which had overcome her directly after Laurie had left her alone, dropped on the couch in her bedroom. For she had been tired out after her "discussion" with Caterina. . . .

"And, see, I did not wake till Lorenzo came back again, and it was late, and I still had to invest myself in my new model from Pensé-Lajeune. *Scusi*, then, *madre*, that I made you wait for me. Good-evening, Neeck. But look—it is not too bad?" Her acquired idiom flaunted indifference towards a successful new evening frock, indifference betrayed by her air of sparkle and conquest. "And Lorenzo, he has said now that he will take me after to-morrow to Monte Carlo for the *chic* season—and that is not too bad also."

PART THREE

CHAPTER I

(1)

ALREADY, before she opened her eyes, Modesta was somehow aware that life was changing, had changed while she slept; that the actual present, there in the *wagon-lit*, was in a state of transformation. . . .

It had not been an ordinary sleep, either. Her lids felt heavy, and her mouth as though it had been filled with sand; but perhaps the motion of the train accounted for that; for she had only travelled twice before in her life; once when la Signora Rice had taken her to England; once when Belmont had taken her to Paris. And now, now Lorenzo was taking her to Monte Carlo. He had not wished it at first, but then he had surrendered. He had surrendered absolutely, without any tiresome conditions. Good! . . .

Modesta stretched a little; luxuriously curled and uncurled her toes. The train was rushing very quickly. It was indeed a miracle to have a bed in a train, and not to have to sit up through the night crowded on wooden seats, eating sausage and drinking from flasks, and shouting to fellow-travellers up and down the aisles, as *la mamma* and *il papa* had to do, if

ever they travelled away from Santa Nucia, which indeed was not often.

How easily Lorenzo had yielded a "Yes" to her importunity. No, not importunity; to her commands. He had a poor spirit, that one. . . . Modesta heard a pipe being tapped out against the edge of the seat. Slowly she opened her eyes, and, from where she had chosen to lie, in the top bunk, looked down upon Lorenzo.

He was not looking towards her. He was pre-occupied with his pipe. Presently he got it going, and gazed abstractedly out of the window, so Modesta was able to study him at her leisure. She was surprised that she had not woken before, while Lorenzo was dressing, for always he was cheerfully noisy, banging about with big clumsy movements, over-strong for whatever simple act he had to perform. He must have dressed quietly this morning, or else she had been sleeping very deeply . . . very deeply indeed. . . .

As though she had drifted back from a long way off, she studied Lorenzo. Yes, she had been right; he was different. There was a sparkle about him, a controlled vitality as though he were—waiting; not his usual boyish impatience, but—as though he were *waiting*. . . .

For Monte Carlo, perhaps? Perhaps they were very

soon going to arrive. If so, she must get up at once. Modesta did not feel at all inclined to get up. Not for years had she felt so languid.

That, reflected Modesta, is what comes of drinking your champagne dry and nasty, like the aristocrats. What one must suffer, to be an aristocrat! One must give up one's own tastes, which are as good or better. . . .

And in this, too, she had won an easy victory over Lorenzo. For they had had an early dinner at Joseph's, she and Lorenzo and Nick and Belmont, before starting on their journey, and *Dio!* how she had enjoyed the champagne at that dinner! It was almost as good as *Moscata*, that luscious, grape-tasting wine of Italy. Only at the end of the meal had she noticed that the other three had been drinking from differently labelled bottles.

On their way to the station she had questioned Lorenzo. They had left the other two behind them, sipping their 1800 *fines de la maison*, talking very little. Belmont—and Neeck.

"Lorenzo, was my champagne cheaper than the champagne drunk by you and *la madre* and Neeck?"

Gravely he had explained to her that he had ordered a special bottle for her, very sweet, because he thought she would prefer it. Whereupon Modesta, who had had a good many glasses, and was excited

and brilliantly flushed, had turned upon him with the ferocity of a small Siamese cat; and had told him he was impertinent and bad and *stupido*, and that he had no respect for her or he would not have given her a champagne inferior to his mother's.

Oh, but he had been submissive, Lorenzo; he had apologised; and when they were in the *wagon-lit*, and she already lay in her bunk and complained of being thirsty, Lorenzo of his own accord suggested that he should stagger down many corridors to the dining-car and fetch another bottle of champagne, but of the driest, of the champagne drunk by Belmont and by other great ladies of England and France. Graciously, therefore, Modesta permitted it; and it had tasted, when he handed up to her a full glass, nastier than medicine, but no doubt that was the dryness, so she had controlled herself after the first recoil and shudder; and she had said, "*Dio mio!* How sad that I might have been drinking this with my dinner, and instead you gave me of that terrible sweet stuff!"

And, handing him back the glass, she had fallen asleep very quickly. Oh, but very quickly! And now . . . what time of morning was it? She could not explain why, but she was uneasy, reluctant to break the silence by attracting Lorenzo's attention towards herself. He was still gazing through the window, and smiling as though at some thought which amused him.

Her eyes followed his; she could not see much from where she lay, even propped on one elbow, but it struck her that the landscape round Monte Carlo was curiously familiar in its curves and colours; curiously like the landscape she had been accustomed to all her life round Santa Nucia.

“Lorenzo!”

(2)

He looked up, and he was smiling. Again she was uncomfortably aware of that tingling sensation about him, so different from his apathy, his enslavement of the night before, and of the days and nights before that, ever since he had agreed to her imperious wish to be taken on this journey.

“Lorenzo, what is the hour of the morning?”

“Five o’clock in the evening,” said Laurie. “Five minutes past five, to be exact.”

“Of yesterday evening?”—Modesta felt bewildered. It could not be, of course, but—“Then should we not already be at Monte Carlo?”

“We’re nearly at Genoa,” said her husband.

Modesta at first did not quite assimilate the information. An accurate map of Europe was not one of her mental possessions; nor were the Blue Train and the Rome Express of separate and distinct values, nor the Gare de l’Est and the Gare St. Lazare. So that it

did seem to her at first possible that in going to this unknown but *chic* Monte Carlo from Paris, they might be passing Genoa on their way. Genoa, of course, she knew by name, being less than an hour away from Santa Nucia. But she did not like Lorenzo's manner of replying to her, just as though her question hardly counted.

"You should not have let me sleep so long," she reprimanded him. "It has made my head ache."

Laurie said nonchalantly, "That was the sleeping draught I gave you."

"*Comé?* How?" Modesta sat suddenly upright.

"In the champagne sec. You must have got the taste a bit, but I knew you wouldn't dare say anything, in case that was how a *signora* ought to enjoy her champagne." And he grinned cheerfully up at her, as though inviting her to share a good joke successfully performed.

Modesta had never heard anything so heartless.

A swerve of the train brought the last splash of sunset to dazzle for an instant on the window of their carriage, dyeing Laurie's hair an even more lurid red than it was by nature. It was curling so crisply that Modesta felt she would like to grip some of it in her fists and tear it out, and then perhaps he would cease to sit there so tranquilly, talking that maddening nonsense about sleeping-draughts. Modesta's brain did

not feel numb and heavy any more; it was whirling now, incredulously. She bade Laurie bring her a drink with the utmost rapidity; after that, she would be better able to obtain ascendancy over that unlooked-for rebellion which she glimpsed in his spirit, and which was so vividly expressed in the curling of his hair.

"There's some water in the bottle," Laurie nodded in the direction of the bathroom; "you'd better get down and get it."

"I do not drink water, I," haughtily from Modesta.

"Right. Then stay where you are."

A little strangled sound came from Modesta's throat; less than a cry; the baffled squeak of a lion on discovering that a mouse can roar. But Laurie heard it. He stood up, and leant with his back against the mirror door of the bathroom, his eyes on a level with hers. He was firmly planted, so that he did not sway as the train swayed.

"What a giant!" thought Modesta, for though she had often noticed how big he was, it was always with the corollary of "How clumsy!" always with the certainty, the conviction that her own slim, childish five-feet-two could dominate him.

She had been leaning over the edge of the bunk the better to spit and hiss in her small fury; yet now she shrank back, and, greatest miracle of all, waited to

hear Lorenzo speak; waited with anxiety, instead of, as lately, letting her contemptuous thoughts stray in different directions till he should have told her often enough for her vanity and his satisfaction how very, very beautiful she was. He did not now give her this welcome information.

"You'd better know," said Laurie, pleasantly enough, "that this express doesn't go to Monte Carlo, nor anywhere near it."

"Then you are a *stupido*, for you have climbed with me into the wrong train. We will have to change, and it will take much longer, and my toilettes will get more crushed in their boxes!"

"I knew before we started."

Modesta merely stared. By now she was sure he was mad as well as in revolt.

"We get out at Genoa," said Laurie, "and we'll drive from there to Santa Nucia. I gave you the dope so that you shouldn't find out till we were nearly there."

"But," Modesta expostulated, "I have no wish to go to Santa Nucia, I!"

"I have."

She pondered for a moment . . . then smiled prettily, and held out her hand.

"*Bene*. We can stay perhaps for two or three days, and still not be late for the season at Monte Carlo."

Laurie laughed at the word "season."

"Why," he cried happily, "didn't you know?—We're going to *live* in Santa Nucia!"

Then Modesta summoned all the power, all the wrath, all the vituperation that had been slowly gathering at the back of her mind during Lorenzo's unbelievable behaviour, and brought them down upon him like sudden rain, like handfuls of quivering arrows, like the small scorching lick of lightning.

She informed him that it would be many years before he should be forgiven; that he would have to render her unfaltering services as compensation for his wickedness; that he was to hire for them the fastest motor-car in all the world to carry her and her toilettes in the comfort to which she was accustomed, from Genoa to Monte Carlo, however far Monte Carlo might be. Furthermore, that she would dictate many telegrams to be sent to Belmont, in complaint of the sleeping-draught, and in complaint of his inconsiderate blunders; that Santa Nucia was the most detestable spot in all the world; that her mouth was dry as a flannel cloth; that he had given her sweet champagne because he had not respected her, and he had given her dry champagne because it was nasty, and now he would not give her any champagne at all, nor water, because he was *brutto e cattivo e sporcissimo*.

. . .

Laurie listened, calmly interested. He even appeared to be gratified by some of her epithets, as though they had been from the velvet pat of a kitten's paw with all the needles sheathed.

Modesta wound up by an unflattering description of his face, which, indeed, did not please her that evening, for the lines of his mouth were hard, and his eyes were narrower and bluer than usual, and his rough tawny eyebrows the colour of the sun which had already set, and she hated the deep line between them, and the carriage was growing dark, and the scenes beyond the window were so familiar that they frightened her. . . .

"Time for you to get up," was all Laurie's reply. "Or, rather, get down. Quick—or you won't be dressed."

"I will lie here and not move. *Ecco!*"

Modesta settled herself back on the pillow. She remembered that Laurie was always most helpless when she became stubborn.

He put one foot on the edge of the lower bunk, swung himself up, lifted Modesta in his arms, and without the slightest difficulty whirled her down and set her on her feet on the floor of the carriage. Then he gave her a slight shaking.

"You've got to do as you're told now, you see."

The tone was good-humoured enough, but the grasp

of his arms had been rather more forceful than considerate. Modesta screamed: "I will not dress, and you cannot make me, and you cannot lift me out at the *stazione* of Genova in my nightgown—and I will stay here and I will shriek and tell the *capo di stazione* and all the *facchini*!—You will look a fool—and you have given me two bruises, and my head hurts—and I hate you—and I will not dress! No no no no no no *NO!*"

Lorenzo had amazed her a great many times already in the last half-hour. He had given her an evil drink to make her sleep; he had put her in the wrong train; he had refused to take her to Monte Carlo; to Italy he had brought her against her will. From her bunk he had dragged her like a brute, like a large and hairy animal. He had not been moved at the sight of her headache nor her thirst nor her rage nor her obstinacy. Clearly then, he was mad, he who only yesterday had been so docile, so willingly her slave. But her many amazements had been as nothing compared with what now occurred, when her indulgent young husband turned round and actually shouted at her—actually dared to use the full strength and volume of his voice—and it was a lusty voice—to stun and compel her into sliding into her clothes, washing her face, combing her hair, and pulling on her hat. And he gave her no assistance, not even to open and shut

her suitcase. He said she did not need powder, and when, with a flicker of spirit, she urged that she must have powder to put on her nose and that the suitcase was too heavy for her to lift, he bellowed back—*dio mio!* that any man could be so ungenerous!—that she had had to lift heavier things and without powder on her nose when she was a serving-maid at the Rices' villa not a year ago.

Modesta wept, glancing sideways at Lorenzo to note the effect on him of her childish, sensitive tears. She observed that he was laughing. Modesta ceased to weep. Her feelings were not hurt, because of her blazing temper, which protected them as though with a ring of fire. But she was brimful of self-pity for the hurt which so easily might have lacerated these same feelings. She wondered how soon madness passed? Meanwhile, for the last twenty minutes of their journey, she remained sullen on the surface; but within, she presently began to grow more cheerful. A sunny notion struck her, that being now back in her own country, where the drama of the emotions was permitted, in fact encouraged, there was nothing to prevent her making a scene directly they got out at Genoa, publicly and in full view of all, calling on Il Signore and the saints to witness that her husband was ill-treating her and should be taken to a house for the lunatics. She felt sure Genoa station would be

interested and attentive, and she felt sure, moreover, that Lorenzo, that English type, would, for very shame, yield to any desire of hers rather than let such a scene continue.

(3)

Modesta could never afterwards explain the fantastic events which were to carry her from her awakening in the *wagon-lit*, to the small *villino* and vineyard and artichoke-patch under the olives where she and Lorenzo presently found themselves dwelling in that dual harmony which only flowers when one of a pair is complete master of the other.

The spectacle of an English gentleman's transformation reached its climax on Genoa platform, where Modesta, according to programme, began to work up her grand scene. For did Lorenzo, that English type, at once do all in his power to prevent her grand scene from carrying to the ears of strangers? Not he. On the contrary, he countered her with another scene, even more grandiose and flamboyant than her own. He did not seem to care that they attracted attention. When she raised her voice, he raised a louder voice, a more echoing shout. When she added pantomime to her arguments, his gesticulations were even more extravagant.

The Italians adored them. *Ma!* But it was not often that one had the pleasure to witness an English husband so normal, so attractively free from the usual incomprehensible restraint of that race. The sympathies of the ring surrounding them were almost entirely with Laurie. It was right that a husband should govern his wife, though strange indeed that he should not have completed his education of her before now, at Genoa station at seven o'clock on a cold March night, with the *tramontana* blowing, and the porters scurrying past like hobgoblins loaded with burdens of luggage. For look, Modesta was an Italian girl, brought up in the tradition that a husband can never be contradicted or swerved from a decision. Why, what then had happened, that she should seem to believe it possible to argue? But he would teach her, that once! He was big and he had a magnificent rolling voice. The porters, the guards, the boy at the buffet, the boy from the bookstall, the lingering passengers, cheered Laurie loudly as he finally marched Modesta away, quenching her protests by the vitality of his own, out of the station and into the car which he had ordered to drive them along the winding sea road to Santa Nucia.

Modesta did not even know what had become of her trunks. Laurie must have given independent orders. They took nothing along except their suitcases.

Yet still she warmed and comforted herself, through her fog of perplexity, by dumb rehearsals of the scene in which she would dazzle *il babbo* and *la mamma*, her two sisters Rosina and la Lisa, and their friends and acquaintances and relations in Santa Nucia, by this sudden appearance of herself wedded to what was certainly an English *signore*, and almost an English milord, herself elegant and sophisticated, wearing a hat and gloves and a fur coat, a wedding-ring on her finger. . . . And perhaps, by the time they reached Santa Nucia, Lorenzo would have ceased to be mad. He would be the old Lorenzo, courteous, adoring her, consulting her at every turn. And perhaps her big trunks full of beautiful clothes, gold and silver dresses, ointments and scents for the toilet from Paris—perhaps these would follow soon, in time for her triumphant apparition to dazzle the little Italian village by the sea, where she had been born, where she had been a serving-maid.

But at Santa Nucia the optimism was finally destroyed, and the evening's fantasy swelled to a nightmare. For though Lorenzo her husband and Borello her father were agreed upon nothing else, seemingly they agreed upon one thing, that the English *signore* had *not* wished well to Modesta. And that though he had run away with her from la Signora Rice in Londra, he had never married her. They agreed beauti-

fully upon this. Again and again, but ever with less vehemence, as her belief in ultimate reality faded, Modesta described to them her marriage ceremony, and how she had been respected and honoured in English society. Borello, obstinate as herself, barely troubled to listen. It would have been hard to convince him, even with Lorenzo as an ally; but with Lorenzo so incredibly against her, what could she do? For the man's memory appeared to be washed blank. He was jovial, insensitive, he was even affectionate to Modesta in the intervals of bullying her, but at the idea that he should have married her, the mere idea that he could have performed an action so incredible, he held his sides and roared like an amused bull.

"Not such a fool, he!" cried Borello, shaking his fist and appealing to the heavens. And—"Not such a fool!" bellowed Laurie.

. . . In Modesta's memory a clear little echo sounded—"Ebbene! Why did you marry me? It was not sense . . ."

Modesta's mother wept, Rosina comforting her. La Lisa, ordered nine times out of the room by her father, had returned for the tenth time and was staring with round appreciative eyes at this startling humiliation of her sister Modesta, who used to refuse so haughtily to occupy herself with either dishes or boots. It was a large room in which the Borello family

lived and cooked and ate and conducted their politics and their receptions, with a big arched stone doorway on to the street, so that Borello's grand denunciation of his second daughter as a *bagagia* unfit for decent company was hardly less public than on the platform of Genoa station.

"Tell them, Lorenzo! Tell them!"

But he was deaf as well as mad. And, indeed, Lorenzo's voice, in its new and phoenix-like incarnation, was enough to deafen anyone, including himself.

Then Modesta flourished her ring, but Borello, far from being impressed, declared, and again with his son-in-law's hearty agreement, that rings could be bought anywhere, and were usually a proof of the deepest guilt.

Modesta suddenly remembered that in her suitcase, with her jewellery and her cheque-book, and not far from her box of gloves, all her most cherished possessions, were her wedding-lines. Pushing la Lisa out of the way of the door, thrusting her little furious body through the mob gathered at the entrance, she rushed after the carriage which had picked them up when the car from Genoa broke down four miles short of Santa Nucia.

Taddeo, the cab-driver, following custom, had left his horses to wander where they pleased, whilst he

looked on, flashing broad slits of merriment at the grand homecoming of *la figlia di Borello*.

Modesta, flying along in pursuit of her honour, dragged out her suitcase from the carriage into the road, and haughtily demanded from the passing padrone of the *ristorante e albergo* "Tre Fratelli," that he should forthwith carry it back to her home; which he, marvelling greatly, consented to do. There she flung it down, during a lull of silence, as though her audience were expecting some sort of conjuring trick. . . . Flung it down, flung it open, tossed out her possessions, rummaged again more and more feverishly. . . . *Dio! Accidente!* She found nothing. The wedding-lines were not there—they had been stolen—but who could have——? For the second time since Lorenzo had been bewitched into unfamiliarity, Modesta, thoroughly frightened, collapsed into hysterical tears. . . . What had happened? What had happened? The saints were asleep!

"*Basta!* Enough!" cried Borello. "This is an apartment where honest daughters weep. I will not have a daughter weeping here who is not honest." And his description of a daughter who was not honest became luxuriant in foliage and gorgeously coloured; and the collected cab-drivers of Santa Nucia, except Taddeo, expressed their robust agreement with him. Taddeo had once cheated Borello rather cleverly over

a load of manure, and they were not good friends. As for Rosina and la Lisa, and a friend of *la mamma* who kept the *pasticceria*, and two of Modesta's aunts, and the post-woman, they had got the infection from Modesta, and were loudly sobbing in chorus, with frequent appeals to *la Madonna*. La Lisa did not cry because she had a solid and un-Italian temperament; and, moreover, Modesta had bullied her a great deal when they had both been in service at the Rices'. Nor did Maria Maddalena cry, Modesta's greatest friend, who had hitherto resented that fortune should bestow her gifts so lopsidedly.

" . . . And this night," finished Borello, "you will sleep not here, and not in the *albergo* in Santa Nucia, where they only give beds to those who are respectable and highly thought of." He bowed profoundly to the innkeeper of the "Tre Fratelli," who had brought along Modesta's suitcase, and the innkeeper bowed with an even more extravagant sweep of deference. "But on the stones, on the beach, on the hard earth, under the olives—what do I care? Perhaps he who is not your husband will take you to sleep to-night in England. I do not care, I. *Putana, mala femina, donaccia, sozzona, vergognosa!* With your sisters you will not speak. Your mother you will not kiss. With our neighbours you will not sit at the table.

I, Borello, will not allow it. I have only two daughters. I spit!" But he belched.

"*Signore gentillissimo*," cried Taddeo to Laurie, for some vague but doubtless logical reason resenting Borello's realism as a personal insult, and therefore offering himself as an immediate ally. "I have a heart, I. I am not like these *scarbati*. I have a little house, very clean, very convenient, hidden in the olives, at a distance from here less than the time it takes to sing a song. It is beautifully furnished; it has a magnificent vineyard, and three terraces of olive trees in flower which will bring in many good soldi in the autumn. It is a little *palazzo*, that house!"

Shouts of derisive laughter from his companions interrupted the eulogy. They knew Taddeo's small palace up among the olives. It might have been at a distance of the singing of a song, but how long was the song? They knew, all of them, exactly how beautiful was the furniture; and that the peasant family to whom it had been let until recently had equally neglected the room and the melon-patch and the paying of rent to Taddeo, and directly they prospered had run away in search of a less picturesque, more convenient property.

"And if the *signore* wishes, I will drive him and his—I will drive him there to-night," concluded prudent Taddeo. "And he can purchase it from me,

subito, subito. We will draw up a contract between us, without interference, before the moon is over the sea."

Borello, who had set his heart upon Modesta sleeping upon the stones that night, at this juncture hurled himself upon Taddeo's chest, offering to fight him in settlement of the present score against him and the outstanding matter of the load of manure. He also mentioned, in passionate resentment, some evil word which the father of Taddeo had once flung at the mother of Borello's wife.

The audience surged eagerly towards the combatants.

"Help me, *signore*, help me—or we do not reach my *palazzino* to-night!" cried Taddeo, outnumbered, in frenzied appeal to that red-headed English giant, who promptly hurled himself forward, cleaving the solid mass of cabmen, spun Borello staggering against the wall, picked up Modesta in his arms for the second time that evening, and rushed with her out of the door and up the road towards the still mildly adventuring carriage. Taddeo followed, swinging the suitcase, which he had picked up empty of half its belongings. The suitcase was tossed into the cab on top of Laurie and Modesta; Taddeo stumbled on to the box-seat, gathered up his reins, and urged the ag-grieved horses towards the bridge and the steep

cobbled road beyond. And so, in a crazy vehicle whose loose parts were perilously tied together with string, pursued by the excited procession streaming from the doorway of Borello's house, waving their arms and calling out terms of tribute, farewell and mocking advice, Modesta was rattled away from her parents' home to which she had dreamt of returning with such royal dignity and condescension.

CHAPTER II

(1)

WHILE Laurie had been sitting as Nick had seen him, silently brooding at a little table outside Fouquet's on the Champs Élysées, he had suddenly and definitely concluded that he alone, who had spoiled Modesta, must rescue Modesta. But he had had no presentiment, then, that his masquerade would prove easier than life itself. Her taunt had flashed him awake to the fact that chivalry is not always chivalrous, but sometimes merely bright air inflated, thinly armoured as a child's balloon.

There he had sat in the rain, too abstracted to care that the waiters, sheltered in a café behind him, were speculating on the sanity of this fanatic without hat or overcoat, without even an umbrella, his back untasted and his feet in a puddle. There he sat . . . and saw things from Modesta's point of view.

What was the good of a husband who treated you as an intellectual equal, who considered your wishes and met your tempers with courtesy, if your racial instincts, incapable of responding to such treatment, cried out for domination and rough common-sense,

and not intellectual equality at all? *Dio mio*, what was the good?

Yes, he could visualise Modesta's point of view, and perceive that his silliness was hard on Modesta; for having been giddily swung to one extreme, she would have to be vehemently hurled to the other, before she could learn to be back again where he had originally found her. Laurie saw, with the strange clearness which ruled his brain that evening, that it would not do for him merely to change into an Italian type of husband, as he could not make an English wife of Modesta. For a brief while, at least, he would have to be a super-husband in the Italian line. Petruchio! . . . He smiled, remembering "The Taming of the Shrew"; remembering his old ambition, to play a part not on the stage, but in reality; and to thrust this part upon the moving everyday world about him, till all his fellow-creatures were baffled and bamboozled into wondering whether they or he had crossed the boundary of sanity.

Perhaps had he not been angrier than he had ever been in his life before, Laurie could not have conceived so ruthless, so outrageous a plan as the one which sprang fully equipped into his mind, to deal with Modesta's insolent metamorphosis. Had he been less in a rage with himself, with Modesta, with the cool slant of Belmont's attitude towards the whole af-

fair, he might have fumbled over the details, he might have blundered in action, and grown soft and penitent at the critical moment. He might have hesitated before the most immense of his lies, or doubted his capacity to keep up a character so alien to his easy-going, good-natured existence. But his anger had left him in that curious luminous state wherein genius works; a clair-voyant state, above anger, wherein he realised that if he could carry through this plan, it would be a rescue of Modesta leagues of chivalry beyond his first boyish, ridiculous white-charger business, when he had carried her off to make of her a *signora*, and give her gold and silver frocks. The child had discarded her nativity; alien matters were happening to her in alien surroundings she had assimilated a code which could never be her own, and was desperately trying to behave by it. Small wonder that he dared not let himself remain passively responsible for this damage.

So Laurence sat with his plan, perfecting it; not caring, in his transformed mood, that to play it he might have to involve himself in one merry lie after another.

. . . Once he threw back his head and laughed. The waiters behind the café window surmised with a shrug that his friends would have difficulty with that one, quite soon.

Actually, Laurie had been thinking of Borello.

Then at last he had risen, and strolled back to the flat, and strolled into his impersonation, still with that same uncanny lack of effort. Nick and Belmont, waiting for him, had ceased to count as anything more than the first of an audience, who, however, were not even aware that they were at a play. They took Laurie's creation of a man dazed and weak and submissive, with the utmost seriousness, so that he wondered, amused, at the power he possessed. That rag at Cambridge . . . the same thing then! . . . Yet a power which had been very little use to him until now. "You ought to have gone on the stage," people had said. He found it difficult to explain that the stage would bore him, that he would be a failure; too difficult to explain the subtle difference between acting and impersonating. For Laurie was lazy and unambitious, but when he eventually moved, he moved mightily, like a young giant.

Easy? He had never dreamt that anything could be so easy—nor so irresistibly enjoyable. He looked at that unreasonable bully, suddenly evolved from fancy into flesh and blood, and most strangely approved of its doings, along all the stages of its journey; the champagne trick; the Rome Express instead of the Blue Train; the sleeping-draught; his robbery of Modesta's marriage-lines while she slept; those taut moments waiting for her to awake; his first scene with

her, and his first scene with her in public; and the flamboyant procession of scenes in Borello's dwelling. He looked back at the crazy triumphant drive, his wife in his arms, to the small pink-washed house among the olives, and at their first night up there. . . . And it all satisfied him deeply, deeply.

(2)

Now, after six months of it, his old identity was so wholly merged into this creature of masquerade, that he looked back on that Laurence Ferrier who had been born in America and had lived in London and gone to Cambridge and had learned how to be an architect, with a slightly mocking incredulity, as at some dim, far-away boy whom he hardly knew, but who could not have been very happy in spite of conventional appearances.

No, he had never been really happy before. By freak, by haphazard, by the mere playing of a rôle for one quick and drastic end, he had discovered the only life that richly suited him, that poured zest up to the very brim of each fresh day. Playing an unnatural part, he had become natural; clapping on a mask, he had at last bared his face. This was how a man should live—toiling in a primitive sort of way, lazing in an even more primitive sort of way between the hours of

toil. This was how a man should live, in the hot sun, with strong raw wine to drink, strongly digging holes in the baked ground for the planting of his peach trees in the autumn, spraying his vines and tying them up as they spread; presently pressing out the oil from the olives, the juice from the grapes. This was how a man should live, with an obedient wife who, by reawakened instinct, knew that her own wishes shrivelled to insignificance beside the few patriarchal laws. A wife, moreover, who, to use their own idiom, was practical for the cooking, practical for the fowls, practical for the cleaning and mending and for carrying heavy burdens.

A wife who adored her husband.

That, obviously, had not taken long. Modesta's emotional system was not a complicated one. While she thought Laurie a fool, she despised him. Directly he had forced his will on her without a fragment of consideration, alternately storming at her, or rollicking, or taking no notice of her whatsoever, as though she were a little green locust shrilling somewhere in the region of his feet, she marvelled at his supremacy, and found him fascinating; a flesh-and-blood man. Moreover, her common-sense, of which she possessed large quantities, was alternately soothed and exultant: to be treated in this way *was* sense; good sense; sound sense. Life could go on while women were treated in

this way. Before, she had been a princess, her vanity gratified, while her arrogance swelled. But beneath all her artificially grown extravagances she had been secretly impatient, secretly dissatisfied. . . . It was not in order, that much her instincts told her; she had not the intellect to work it out any further.

Ma! It had been terrible, but terrible, to be dragged back to Santa Nucia, instead of peacocking in the season at Monte Carlo. Terrible to have been made a fool of in front of her parents and half the inhabitants of the little town. To be scolded and scoffed at, and finally attacked because, far from being a *signora*, she was not even an honest wife. . . .

Was she? Modesta could not feel sure. She remembered, of course; but one often remembers dreams. And what was the good of saying and saying that Lorenzo had married her, when Lorenzo swore and swore again that he could not recall any such folly? What was the good, when *il babbo* declared out of inflexible experience that *il signore inglese* had not married his daughter, because he, Borello, knew that such things did not happen, and if he knew they did not happen, then they did not? *Il babbo* and Lorenzo banded together completely overwhelmed Modesta's trust in her own memory. And the Signori Rice were not any more at their villa, so she could not ask them to testify. And she had no money, because Lorenzo

had taken it all away. And she could not write, in spite of the brief splendour of possessing a cheque-book, because she had never learned to write much more than her name. And though it had been terrible to be galloped away by night to a rough little pink house with stone floors, solitary on the hill, and to be kept there, and made to work there, work hard, not much food, and very little lying in bed, yet, on the whole, after the first shock, such a coarse life in such a humble house with such a robust husband became more credible and more normal than that glittering enchantment which had happened to her far away across a great gap of time and space, and beneath a lilac silk eiderdown, when Mitchell had brought breakfast, exquisitely served, to her bedside in Belmont's flat.

Modesta had struggled against her fate, during the early days on the little farm. Modesta had screamed and defied Lorenzo, and wept, and run away and come back again; she had disobeyed and been sullen, and bitten Laurie once or twice in the hand, and refused to cook his dinner or to clean the floors, or to scrape off the heavy earth caked about his boots. For she had grown soft during her sybaritic months; and the old lessons which *la mamma* had taught her and then Rosina in the kitchen of the Signora Rice, had to be painfully learnt all over again. Now and then she ached for grandeur, for her gold and silver dresses,

her gloves, her visiting-cards, her account at the big shops, rugs more yielding than moss beneath her feet, and motor-cars that were like great purring cats. Yes, she had lived sleekly once. . . .

But gradually Modesta forgot; gradually her hereditary sturdiness came back. The early Ligurians were all wiry and supple and tireless, a hard, limber, dark little race, on the defensive against the rest of the world, but, where they once adhered, loyal and tenacious. This little Ligurian Cinderella was quicker to seek compensation than had her prototype after twelve o'clock had struck. If the coach was gone, at least the pumpkin was left. A magical gift reversed, but not obliterated. . . . Pumpkins are solid beneficial things.

She was lonely, but that was because of the *disgrazia* of not being married. Modesta did feel wistfully that she had indeed remained honest, and that she was really married to Lorenzo. But he must do as he pleased about remembering. Meanwhile, one must be philosophic, one must endure. There were, after all, the fowls and the two pigs for company, and presently a goat. She did not pamper any of these, but regarded them in a businesslike way, as representing *soldi* if rightly treated; yet they helped her not to feel too isolated. And anyway she had Lorenzo, who, she perceived now, was handsome as a god, and good com-

pany into the bargain. They had many pungent jokes together when he had time to talk to her, though very often, as men must, he went down to the city, to the wine-shops of Santa Nucia, and sat with other men; bragged or bargained with them, selling wood from his ancient olive-roots, buying sand and manure for his cultivations. They accepted Lorenzo down there, but they would not accept her. Borello, boasting of the sinner in his family, would barely bother to stop, merely modulate, as Laurie sauntered in. One must be philosophic, reflected Modesta again, and Lorenzo could always trust her, during his absence, to be practical for the farm. They had broad beans and artichokes, tomatoes and melons and sweet pepper to attend to, as well as the olives and the little vineyard; as well as the fowls, the two pigs and the goat. And then Modesta had to be busy indoors. They had a living-room, a kitchen, and above, two other rooms, and Lorenzo would not allow her a girl to help in the cleaning; in fact, it was doubtful whether any would have consented to come. . . . "*Fa' niente*, I can manage!" La Lisa, outwardly stolid, but secretly thrilled with the intrigue, disobeyed parental orders and plodded up nearly every day, scrounging for news; a gossip-carrier down to Santa Nucia, but useful, for she consented to shop for Modesta, and thus spared her the ordeal of herself going down into the city for

butter and bread. La Lisa also helped her sister sometimes with the washing; there was a great deal of it, for Lorenzo was still *fastidio* about not wearing the same blue cotton shirt twice, after it had been grimed and sweated through in a morning, for that was a very hot summer, the hottest they had had for years. By great good fortune the well which belonged to their farm did not run dry; but the well was a short trudge down the hill, where the three fig trees coiled so strongly from its walls that they prevented the nespoli tree on the brink from bearing fruit, and that sight angered Modesta whenever she went to and fro carrying water for her stone washing-tank, for the nespoli could be sold for a small price, but figs were too wild and plentiful, and would be valueless when they ripened—except that Lorenzo liked to eat them. Her Lorenzo—*il Magnifico!*

(3)

Laurie had previously had a pretty illusion about himself, that the sight of Modesta doing heavy work would be nearly unbearable to him, and that the fiercest struggle of his performance as a brute and bully would be against the innate tradition beating in his breast, that women did not fetch nor carry while muscular men were on the premises to do it for them.

But by some miracle of change in his nature, and to

his own great amazement, he was able now to look on with the utmost equanimity while Modesta laboured with her burdens. It seemed a thousand years ago that he had sat in the dining-room at the Rices' villa, burning with indignation because she had had to carry a few plates, or clean Alan Rice's boots. What a boy he had been, with what ready-made ideas! Not that he would have let her clean Alan Rice's boots in his present more primitive state of mind; only his own. To this his soul acquiesced readily. It was all right, and deeper than all right, that Modesta in his home should do all the things that for the first twenty-four years of his life had been done by servants; not because she had been a servant, but because she was now his woman. Any more formal arrangement, viewed in retrospect, appeared to him unaccountably absurd, out of harmony, against the grain of the wood, contrary to all contentment. Thus, and towards the sea, the streams should run; thus, and towards the sky, the trees should grow. And thus a man should live.

Nor did he marvel that Modesta was loving him, nor question the quality of his own love towards her: whether in this older sharper atmosphere it had dwindled or swelled. Some happiness that did not need analysis was unfolding from Modesta towards him, sweet as a flower, but stronger than a flower. For Modesta's quality had roots to it as well, and pushed

down into the earth as well as up into the air. He was conscious of her sap, her resilience, her moments of tender yielding, the salt of her slightly ironic attitude towards life; and as a matter of course his days were meaty with this consciousness, though they rarely met and did not often speak between sunrise and sunset. This was no idyll that they were living, no pastoral that awaited an artificial rounding-off to render it exquisite. By some flaming paradox, the moment he had dragged her into unreality, the dream became everyday life, and reality faded to an old silly dream at the end of a long backward vista.

Only—how long could it go on? April, May, June. . . . Modesta's lesson had been taught her already by the time the olive blooms had to be sprayed, so why did Laurie so intently carry out the spraying operations as though his future bread and macaroni depended upon it? Early on arrival, he had planted night-scented stock all round the house, and freesias, yet he must have known that if he were to be successful at all in teaching Modesta to curb her insolence, discover her master, destroy her superb opinion of herself, correct her upstart notion of what God and Lorenzo would allow her to acquire while she was a small unit upon earth, the lesson would have been taught well before the last wild narcissi which starred the terraces in the silvery pools of sunshine should

have died, and the blue grape hyacinths which followed them, and the orchids and clumps of white iris. June, July, August—the nights grew hotter, and the frogs never stopped croaking from the dried-up patches of pond and river in the valley. Fireflies trailed their vagrant green sparks through the sensuous air, and the wrinkled fawn lizards lay flat and comfortably inverted on the vaulted ceiling of the living-room. The figs were ripening, till presently they would burst with their own dark juiciness. Oranges and mandarins were vivid spots of colour in their glossy foliage, and were plucked with the paler lemon. Yet day followed day, and with no more excuse to stay, Laurie still made no move to quit his dwelling nor his toil. The days were so long and so brilliant that it seemed they never could end. They were aromatic with hot scents, and yet Laurie felt no languor as during his first enchanted stay in Italy. He was part of the country now; he had their habits, their endurances. He ate garlic with a lusty appetite. He drank off tumblerfuls of crude new wine, criticising it not by its vintage nor flavour, but, as did his boisterous companions in the wine-shops, by the quantity of alcohol it contained. And while he drank, he boasted of the wine which he meant to produce that autumn from his vines; boasted, although . . . June, July, August . . . surely he must have known that by September he and Modesta

would not be living any more on a small farm hidden among the olive trees above Santa Nucia!

Now and then he did indeed remember that this episode of Gargantuan buffoonery had been originally planned to end at the earliest possible moment; yet again and again he postponed the ending of it, the sudden crisp snap—no more Lorenzo!—back to civilisation where he was Laurence Ferrier!

He took little apparent notice of Modesta, knowing that now she would always be docile, always in and about his home. If ever he had a child, he would treat it with more consideration than he treated his wife. They all did. It was natural. It was how the threads were spun. . . .

CHAPTER III

(1)

✓ ONLY—how long could it go on? April, May, June . . . and still Belmont lingered in Paris, instead of returning to her flat in Knightsbridge; or, what would have been more natural, starting off in agitated pursuit of Laurie. She knew that she ought to have been worried about Laurie, missing Laurie, furious with Laurie. Again and again she tried to goad her anxiety by reminders of his strange disappearance with Modesta, a disappearance which he had never explained. “The young couple left Paris for Monte Carlo”—what conventional happiness in the phrase! And a few days later, a brief note from Laurie, post-marked Santa Nucia, and simply saying that they had changed the course of their journey, and had gone to Italy instead, and did not know how long they were going to stay.

“Modesta will bring him back,” thought Belmont, lazily. She had to find some excuse for her own inertia in the matter. Modesta had promised; she could trust that clever child. Modesta had given her promise to Belmont that if ever Laurie should stray, he should

be firmly brought back, and deposited again with apologies at his mother's feet. So Belmont left it to Modesta, and told herself that she was acting wisely in thus restraining her great longing to see the boy again, to rush off to him and beset him with questions. She told herself also that she was waiting in Paris because that was where Laurie had left her, and that was where Laurie would first return.

Only—how long could it go on?

Nick did not accept a part in any theatre that April, May, June . . . he said that none was sufficiently good to tempt him to forsake idleness. He said that he had some savings, and that the knowledge of them upset his temperament, and they had better be spent—wasted—quickly, or he would never act again. . . . He said—many things to excuse himself for lingering in Paris, when there were profitable tours going north and south and east and west. Since their quarrel, he and Belmont seemed imperceptibly to have passed across from storm and danger and precipice into a country that was courteous with flowers and sunshine, a very meadow of peace. Now that the thing had been spoken of, there was no more peril that at any moment one or other of them might speak of it. They went about together marvelling at this change; dawdling along the quays of Paris, dawdling in the vistaed gardens of Paris, willing to dawdle and to stroll and

never to hurry. Willing, too, that Laurie should not be there. It was queer how these two enemies were contented at last in each other's company. It could not last, of course; and of course Nick would soon tire of spending his savings and of refusing all parts; and of course Belmont was all the time torn and racked by her solicitude for Laurie and Modesta and their welfare. She was waiting, let it be understood, just waiting. . . .

The days slid along, and once she confessed to Nick—"D'you know, I'd often wondered exactly what the word 'halcyon' meant."

She did not add—"And now I've found out!" Nicholas was so quick, you had to take away from what you were saying to him rather than add to it.

June, July, August. . . . It was ridiculous to stay in Paris after the first week in July, yet still, by some tacit understanding, they did not speak of going separate ways. Belmont had a sudden impulse to elongate this elastic span of time to its utmost golden length, by a motor-tour through the valley of the Rhone, and then . . . oh, then down into Italy in quest of the truant children. She invited a young couple, friends of hers, the Gatacres, to come along and share the tour. And—in careless parenthesis—Nick could come too. She told the Gatacres that she could not bear to be without a son; and that since her own had married,

Nick had almost slipped into his place. She told herself that this was nearly true. She told herself that the best device to keep Laurie her own for ever, in spite of his marriage, was to have allowed him to stray as far as he wanted to and farther; but that now the experiment must really be clipped to an end. And she told Nick nothing at all, because he never needed to be told, having a divine capacity for taking to-day and to-morrow for granted, and letting the day after to-morrow be the day that looks after itself. And when they reached Avignon, a further longing swept over Belmont not to go down into the blaze and the white dust of the Lower Corniche, but to stay instead on the placid roads of Provence; explore Arles and Orange, Les Baux and St. Remy. . . . "My people were born and had their farm somewhere near St. Remy," Nick declared, becoming suddenly an ardent Provençal. The Gatacres were quite agreeable to the change of plan. So they shamelessly abandoned Italy. The Pays du Tendre smelt of hot myrtle and the hot stones in the little walled towns; and the peasants played the tabor and wore wide fringed hats to shade them from the sun; and Nick's dramatically improvised instinct recognised the ancient Lepuy farmstead every time the car had to slow down out of respect to the shuffling flocks shepherded by some dreaming boy who peeled his stick and only thought of Mireille; or be-

cause of white oxen drawing the lumbering high carts, oxen with branching horns and their brows bound by an odd Egyptian head-dress of plaited straw.

And perhaps, thought Belmont, if you took time slowly enough, and sipped your wine slowly enough at one of the many hostels de la Reine Jeanne, clear rose-coloured Tavel or Hermitage mellow like dark wallflowers, perhaps then time would take you slowly too.

(2)

July, August, September. . . . They returned to Paris, and Nick began inevitably to look at life again from a professional standpoint. He had been shown a play, "a divine comedy," he declared—and not in the sense that Dante meant it. The leading part would suit him perfectly. But the dramatist was a man already sufficiently famous, and Nick could not afford to purchase the play. It would be offered to some established actor-manager, who would certainly not be giving the rôle away to another. Nick shrugged his shoulders, pretended not to care.

"If you had kept your savings——" Belmont reminded him teasingly.

"That would have been worse, for then I should have had nearly enough, and not quite. I can't bear to

be tantalised! Thank goodness, quite a large fortune stands between me and my desire.”

But as he could not bear the notion of at once playing in a less glorious part, Belmont saw that for a little while longer she could postpone going in search of Laurie and Modesta. She recognised that presently something would have to be done about it. Their disappearance and silence were growing more mysterious every week. In deference to her own absorbing passion for Laurie, she could not continue for ever to enjoy Paris light-heartedly with Nick. But . . . just for a little longer perhaps. It was always a pity to break a spell; they so soon broke themselves. She told herself that she was not young any more, and that therefore her energy was ebbing and she hated to face the prospect of sudden action. She told herself that she had a presentiment that Modesta would bring Laurie back to Paris by September, no other month, and that therefore it was folly to go chasing off in frenzied pursuit when a week or a day might reveal them on the threshold of her charming little dim blue and lemon-tinted Louis salon. She told herself that they were merely on a long honeymoon, and that Modesta had been homesick for Italy and reluctant to leave it again, so that Laurie, always weak—always *chivalrous*, in quick correction!—was indulging his wife. She told herself——

And then one evening Nick told her: "I'm leaving for Italy to-morrow."

They were having dinner quite alone, in a spacious restaurant in the Bois. It was a restaurant where the fashionable herd went for supper; these two wilfully chose it at the wrong hour, because it fascinated them to sit under the artificial dome of sun, moon and stars in a bright blue sky, and be surrounded entirely by beautifully laid empty tables, each with its shimmer of white linen, of silver, of twinkling lamps and expensive flowers. Their dialogue always sounded to them bizarre as stage dialogue during these meals, because they were the only two there. It was raining softly outside: a tender pattering sound in the circle of trees that lent pastoral effect to the highly civilised empty restaurant.

Belmont's first reaction to Nick's abrupt tidings was of childish disappointment. He had said he was going away. She had not yet grasped the significance of "Italy."

"Oh, Nick, must you? This is so enchanting!"

He lifted quizzical, harlequin's eyebrows.

"Enchanting?"

"Enchanted. . . ."

She had barely altered the word, but it meant more.

"I must go, *ma mère*; I've heard from Laurie."

And that was the end of enchantment. They might have been sitting anywhere, in any city, hearing the rain fall round any restaurant. It was all harsh and commonplace. He had heard from Laurie. . . . In Belmont, all the old jealousies sprang up again, the old feeling of menace, having to be met by the old forced assurance that Nick had promised, promised . . . so she need not fear. Once again she was on the defensive, recognising Nick as her enemy, wishing him, oh, somewhere far away, back on his grandparents' farm in the Middle West states if need be. What business was it of his to go to Italy? To go to Laurie? Laurie was her own, in spite of Nick. Always when she was happy, Nick came along and spoilt it . . . she had forgotten with whom she had been so happy during April, May and June . . . during June, July and August . . . and half, only half, of September.

"*Ma mère*"—that was Nick all over, gadfly to torment her! Whenever Laurie was mentioned, Nick called her by that name, as though to remind her that though she was not his mother, well, nor was she Laurie's mother.

God! How she hated Nick.

"What does he write? Where is he? Why does he want you?"

Nick handed her the sheet of cheap notepaper. Laurie had merely scrawled——

"I'm in a hell of a mess, and don't know what to do. Do come along."

He had not even added "If you can."

"Santa Nucia. So he's still there."

"Yes, he's still there. Odd, isn't it?"

"When did you say you were going?"

"Rome Express, to-morrow."

"So soon?"

"He's in a mess," Nick reminded her gently.

"What can you do, even if he is?"

"That remains to be seen." But Nick was sorrowing for their lost comradeship; sorrowing that Belmont had once more drawn the sword between them.

"He's not—considerate: he's a baby, calling out for you like that. How can he know that you're not acting?"

Nick only said, "Oh, Belmont, Belmont!"

She rushed on, breathlessly combating his unspoken wish that she should step back again into what she had been only yesterday, only ten minutes ago, and all through their Paris spring, their Provençal summer. . . .

"That rôle in 'Les Neiges d'Antan'—the rôle you're so anxious to play, you'll lose all chance of it, rushing away like this! You're so headstrong, Nick."

"I've no chance of it anyhow. Decugis will sell it to Fabre, who'll play Le Bossu himself."

After a long pause: "Supposing——" Belmont began slowly.

"Don't, Belmont! Ah, please don't!"

"It's your part; you ought to play it, you'd be marvellous. Nick . . . supposing I gambled on your career? Supposing I bought the play for you now, quickly, before anyone else, and rented a theatre, and—oh, Nick! I'd love to! Let me!"

He saw that she was thrilled at the idea; even unselfishly thrilled beyond all thought of her desperate necessity for waylaying him in Paris.

"Well, Nick?"

"Well, Belmont?"

His smiling eyes looked straight into hers, across the wine and the fruit. . . . The rain was drumming harder now, on the roof of their spacious restaurant, but on the ceiling above them the false sky was bright blue; the sun, moon and stars were shining all at once.

". . . *Let me!* I've done so little for you lately. It will cost something to buy Laurie his partnership, but there'll be plenty, plenty over for you too. Your careers"—she remembered to put it in the plural—"are so tremendously important to me!"

Nick was busily smoothing, folding and twisting a sheet of silver paper from his packet of "Turmac" into a tiny silver boat. And so intent was he upon the result of these foldings and twistings, that he obvious-

ly could not swivel his attention away from his creation on to Belmont's proposals.

She went on pleading—"And I want just a few proud moments. Nick, why didn't I think of this before?"

"Ah, that is just it, you see. Why didn't you?"

"It's not too late. Well, Nick?" again.

"Well, Belmont. What are your conditions?"

"There is only one."

"I thought so!"

"We don't want any delay, do we? If I negotiate with Decugis for 'Les Neiges d'Antan,' if I buy it for you—promise that you won't go dashing off to Italy to-morrow! Nick . . . you'll promise?"

Nick laughed. And with a brisk snap of the fingers, flicked the little silver boat across the table towards her . . . past her, and on to the floor.

"Promise? *No!* Not again, Belmont. Not for the third time!"

(3)

The Rome Express was within a minute of moving out of the Gare du Lyon when Nick, who had been leaning out of the corridor window, drew in his head and went to sit down in the railway carriage that fortunately he happened to have to himself. He was in an unusually black mood for him; as the train, slowly

gathering impetus, rushed him away from Paris, he gently cursed Laurie and his ambiguous summons and his scrapes and his childish reliance on Nick to get him out of them.

The door slid open, and Belmont stood there, mocking him with her smile. Nick jumped to his feet.

"*Sacré mille*——" and checked himself. Then he began to laugh. "Belmont—you devil!"

"I'm in the next coach," announced Belmont, as though they had planned the meeting in the most commonplace way and she had only to inform him of her whereabouts.

"But it was lucky I caught a glimpse of you leaning out of the window, Nick darling, or I might have walked for miles along the train in the wrong direction before I found you."

And she sat down opposite him.

Nick realised that, far from being penitent, she was mischievously delighted at the effect of the trick she had played on him. A very young Belmont, her eyes dancing; a very adorable Belmont, ten thousand leagues removed from the woman who had confronted him across the table at the restaurant in the Bois the evening before.

"How far are you coming, *ma mère*?"

"To the end of your journey, *mon fils*."

"All the way to Santa Nucia?"

She nodded. "All the way there, and perhaps back again," and lit a cigarette. "D'you like my travelling coat, Nick? It's new—Pensé-Lajeune. I just had time to get it this morning after I'd reserved my *wagon-lit*."

Yes, Nick did like her travelling coat, and her impudent, two-cornered travelling hat. He very much appreciated that she should have taken so much trouble to equip herself for this journey with him, and said so. Then he added, "I'd love to know what your motive is?"

"To keep an eye on you, of course. What else should it be?"

"I appreciate your mistrust also," murmured Nick; "almost as much as the coat and hat; perhaps even a little more."

Quite suddenly their journey was suffused with a quality of gay adventure. And if the summer had been tranquil and golden as still champagne, it was Belmont who had now shot the sparkle into it. She was so completely owner of the situation that Nick, thrown off his guard by her appearance, was content to remain amused and helpless. He was not often helpless, and enjoyed the sensation. . . . Belmont exacted full fees for all the many times that he had had her under his command.

The train swung towards Mont Cenis. It was still raining in France; perhaps in Italy the sun would be

shining. What fun to be going to Italy like this, together! They speculated almost heartlessly on what awaited them there? With an eager curiosity which all through April, May and June, through June, July and August had been strangely muffled, they speculated on Laurie's hell-of-a-mess; on what Laurie and Modesta had been doing all this while? And why they had not gone to Monte Carlo? And why Modesta had acquiesced in this long, silent, perplexing sojourn in her native village? And they agreed it was even stranger that their curiosity should have been in abeyance for so long a time, and that they could have ignored the existence of the other couple who had swung south ahead of them by the same route.

"I can't understand Modesta," said Belmont.

"I can't understand Laurie," said Nick.

"She was so in love with Monte Carlo and Paris and London."

"He was so crushed that evening before they went. Do you remember when he came into your hotel salon from sitting outside the café in the rain? He was unnatural, as though he had been hit, as though he had surrendered."

"And afterwards," Belmont carried on the recollection as though there had been no long space of time between; as though there had been no lull of friendship between herself and Nick. . . . They were

at war again now, but it was a laughing war, drained of its bitterness. "Afterwards we had a scene, you and I, and I thought, like the heroine in every melodrama, that things would never be the same again!"

"They never were!"

"I was a fool to be afraid of you," mused Belmont. "And I don't know exactly what I was afraid of."

"Oh, but surely," he mocked her, "you were in a panic that I should tell Laurie that you weren't his mother."

Belmont blew out a drift of soft blue smoke between them. Through the smoke he heard her voice murmur: "I needn't have been. After all, you promised me . . . twice."

"And if I'd been a grain more ambitious, then thrice."

"Yes. But twice will be enough—for a man of honour."

There was no challenge in her confident statement. She was quite irresistibly the conqueror to-day. She looked even capable, as the smoke cleared away, of cheeking him like a schoolgirl, about his "honour" and the inconvenience it involved.

"*Bien!*" said Nick, with his usual shrug. "It doesn't seem to matter very much, *à la fin*, who is Laurie's mother—and who isn't. Granted that I was beside myself that night."

"And this night?"

"Beside you, Belmont, which is much pleasanter."

"And yet you nearly missed the pleasure. Why not have invited me yesterday to accompany you on this elder-brotherly quest?"

"I thought you would be in the way."

"Make no mistake—I shall be."

(4)

They arrived at Santa Nucia by car from Genoa about noon the following day. Nick suggested courteously that Belmont might care to repose herself at the *albergo* while he, Nick, made inquiries as to the exact whereabouts of the truants. Belmont thanked him politely for his consideration, but, thank you, she was not at all tired, it had been a most charming journey, and she would accompany him while he made inquiries.

A little group of cabmen, lounging in the square shady *piazza* between the sea and the principal café, directed Nick to the residence of Borello, the father of Modesta, who, they said, would give him further information as to the domicile of *quello Signore Inglese*. Then, as Nick and Belmont walked away, they winked at each other, expressing absorbing interest in the outcome of the interview, and immense pleasure

at their own foresight in thus suggesting Borello as a means of communication between Nick and Laurie, instead of sending the stranger direct to the Signor Lorenzo, as they might well have done. Two or three of them followed Nick at a short distance, for there was always a good chance that any dramatic interview might take place in the sunny street, instead of discreetly and annoyingly between four walls.

Borello was not at home, la Lisa informed them—only they did not know it was la Lisa. He was playing bowls—*bocce*—just behind the *Osteria della Tranquillita*. The *signore* would find him there.

Nick, who, luckily for his independence, spoke Italian fluently, whereas Belmont spoke hardly any, inquired rapidly of la Lisa if she perhaps could direct him to the dwelling of *il signore* Laurence Ferrier. For it struck him that it would be fun to outwit Belmont and reach Laurie ahead of her, if only by an hour. But la Lisa merely stared at him dumbly as though he were a being from another and uncelestial world. She did not like him, and la Lisa's likes and dislikes were extremely strong. She closed the door and left them standing outside.

"You really had better go and lie down," Nick suggested again. "It is always terribly hot in Italy at this time of day in September. You will suddenly crumple up, exhausted."

"Shall I really?" murmured Belmont, disdaining his susceptibility to the climate. "Thank you, Nicholas. I'm feeling just fine, and ready to roam for miles if we have to."

"This *osteria* with the bowling alley—probably a rough little pub, unfit for delicate ladies."

"You'll protect me."

"Against the ardour of seven singing Italians? *Ma chère*, you don't know them!"

Belmont spoke to a passing priest.

"*Osteria della Tranquillita?*" she asked, copying la Lisa's pronunciation, and adding an upward inflection and a smile, so that the *padre* at once understood her, and was able to direct her.

"You may follow me if you like," said Belmont charmingly to Nick. "This is the way."

The *Osteria della Tranquillita* was easily located, by the uproar which came from the bowling alley running along one side of it. Nick and Belmont walked straight forward and asked for Borello, sure that he was one of the virile men who were throwing the ball, rushing along beside it with screams of encouragement, expostulation or dismay, after each throw explaining to his companions, who sat or stood alongside, drinking and criticising, why exactly success had eluded him. Whenever one of the balls touched another ball, a knot of players hurled themselves to-

wards it, gesticulating and fighting, so that the effect was more of Rugby football than of a game of bowls. A great deal of vitality and energy went to the game; the wine in the lopsided wicker flasks was obviously strong; and the afternoon sun blazed down on the bare heads of all except Borello, who wore a peaked nautical cap which he had never yet been known to discard. On Nick's inquiry, he was pointed out to the strangers, with much excited and hopeful expectation of a drama of some sort. Borello bowed low to Belmont; he was benignly but not truculently drunk; "*Una bella, una bellissima signora!*" for, having spent his morning at the bottom of a well, repairing the walls, he now rejoiced to be out again where there was hilarity and drink and dry heat and ladies with pale gold hair.

He asked Nick and Belmont to command him, and Nick rapidly inquired for Laurence Ferrier.

"*Mio figlio,*" added Belmont, in soft, halting Italian, but she was not able to understand the torrent of eloquence which the inquiry released from Borello. Nick did not attempt to translate. He had an unfair advantage over Belmont, and meant to keep it. Moreover, he was completely bewildered by the man's constant reference to the "betrayal" of his daughter by the *signore* Lorenzo, and by the atmosphere of assent and approval supplied by the surrounding bowl-play-

ers, who, naturally, had forsaken their sport in favour of the better sport of watching Borello expand and float himself up to heaven.

Betrayal?—Living in sin?—Modesta a *bagagia*?—what lunatic tangle was here? What had Laurie been doing? It was preposterously apparent that whatever Borello believed or pretended he believed against the couple *qua* couple, he bore Laurie no grudge. Pæans of praise gushed out of him for the “*bellezza*,” the charm, the manly fascination of Lorenzo “*bravo Inglese*,” who had captured his second daughter’s affections. The *signori* would understand that he was blaming no one, he, Borello; and that he congratulated them on the felicity of possessing such a relation and countryman. . . . He was watching their faces warily all the time he spoke, to see what was in the air, why they were questioning him, which way he should jump.

“*Mia povera figlia*,” he said, spreading his hands. He could not blame her, no! He had turned her out of his house. He had forbidden his wife, he had forbidden his other two daughters, both excellent and virtuous, ever to see the sinner; but he did not blame her, for she was sensitive and passionate, and still very young, and he himself, Borello, also sensitive and passionate, although an eternally faithful husband, yet sometimes went to Genoa. But the *signore*

would understand, for he was a man too, it was nature for men to go sometimes to Genoa, and *la natura e bella!* "*La povera figlia*" was the most beautiful of the three, and his treasure, and his pride. *Dio mio! Corpo di Bacco!* He had dashed her from him out of the house, but his other daughters were modest and good, and *il signor* Lorenzo was properly brave, that one, with a great respect for him, Borello, who might have been his father-in-law had Modesta not been weak and foolish, had she adjusted matters . . . but his daughters were not practical for their own advantage, as indeed how should they be? For he, Borello, was an honest man, and willing to credit the whole human race with honesty only very slightly inferior to his own. . . .

And Nick, with Paris still vividly in his memory, could not help seeing this discourse as a sort of rhetorical Place de l'Étoile, where all avenues led to the Arc de Triomphe and the Arc de Triomphe was Borello. Not only his virtuous daughters were to his credit, but also the daughter who was the victim of a *grande passion*. Not only was Lorenzo a wicked seducer, but he had learnt from Borello how to play bowls with the same cunning and energy as Borello himself!

"*Io—Io—I!*" cried Borello, thumping himself upon the chest. "*Signore, un bicchiere di vino!*" and

from a flask on the nearest table he poured three glasses brimful of wine—the glasses practically snatched from his companions' lips—and handed two of them with a deep obeisance to Belmont and Nick. The third potation was tilted down his own throat, and then, suffused by mellow glory, Borello burst into song. . . . He had a very fine voice, and you never had to beg him to bring his music! Leaving mere prose behind, he improvised a hymn, perhaps in praise of virtue, perhaps of "*la natura*," perhaps of bowls. It was certainly a hymn in praise of Borello, and it rolled without self-consciousness upon the waves of golden air.

Nobody seemed surprised. Borello was a favourite in Santa Nucia. They were all hoping politely that the English *signora*, so white, so fair, was appreciating this burst of fatherly feeling.

Meanwhile, Nick, in quick Italian, inquired of one of the other men exactly whereabouts was the dwelling of Laurie and Modesta, and how one might soonest hope to reach it. Then with some difficulty and many farewells, he dragged Belmont away.

"They're living in an olive grove on a hill quite a distance away," he told her. "You had better let me go alone."

For he was curious to find out why all Santa Nucia, including Borello, had received an impression that

no marriage had ever taken place between Laurie and Modesta, and he preferred that enlightenment should come to him while Belmont was not with him. It was probably concerned with the "hell of a mess" to which Laurie had referred in his note. It was quite likely that the boy wanted his mother kept out of it. Belmont, therefore, must be shaken off for an hour or two. So Nick concealed the further information that there was quite a tolerable carriage road up to the little farm.

"Suppose you go back to the inn and lie down, while I go and fetch the lad?"

Belmont smiled. "Whither thou goest—" she murmured sweetly.

"*Ma chère*, it's a boiling hot afternoon, and you are not used to this climate. You will catch a sunstroke. It is a steep climb, and all on foot; no road, they tell me; and your shoes . . ." He glanced downwards, hoping to see absurdly high heels. But, alas! Belmont's sense of the appropriate had betrayed him; her shoes were most suitable for climbing mule-tracks; so were the cool linen costume and light shady hat, into which she had changed directly on arriving at Santa Nucia. She did not think it necessary to emphasise these facts, but merely asked which was the way. Nick looked disgusted; for directly Belmont had been persuaded to lie down, and was safe and cool

behind the closed green shutters of the *albergo Tre Fratelli*, he had naturally meant to hire a carriage and drive most of the way up to Laurie's farm. Now there was no help for it; he could not undo his excellent lie, and must therefore walk. He prayed that Belmont, unused to such exertion, might very soon give up, and have to be assisted down again.

Unfortunately for Nick, Belmont dared to prove one of those slender ethereal beings who never tire; and it was Nick himself, who had not bothered to change out of his travelling suit, who quite sharply began to feel that toiling up steep cobbled tracks on a hot Italian afternoon was not his *métier*. Most of the way the olives were too sparse to form any shelter. The sky was a fierce stretch of blue above them; the earth underneath was hot and parched; there was no cool sound of rushing water. Belmont was always lightly treading a few feet ahead, and Nick began to hate his own boots. He reflected wryly that his acute discomfort was a punishment meted out on those who unfairly exploit their knowledge of languages for purposes other than the truth. The walk seemed to go on for ever; he grew hotter and hotter, his heart thumped, his felt hat rimmed his head tighter than a band of iron. He had not noticed before that his coat cut him under the arms. He had not noticed before, either, how much he detested Laurie for choosing such

an ungetatable dwelling. Finally, he sank down on a stone by the wayside and complained loudly.

Belmont, who was not at all tired and still deliciously cool, halted at his cry, and came back, sat down beside him and told him carefully that he was not used to the climate, and that he should not have attempted to walk on a hot Italian afternoon in September. . . .

“You should have gone to lie down quietly, darling, and let me fetch the lad——”

Nick was speechless. In addition to his other mortifications, his ear caught the sound of approaching wheels. The spiral road which wound near the terrace on which stood Laurie’s farm must therefore be close above their heads, though still invisible from where they sat beside the mule-track. Presently, a rickety carriage swayed along, driven by a beaming Taddeo, and crowded with apprehensive Americans on their way to the picturesque village of Nucia Castello.

. . . The noise of wheels died away again. Nick was afraid to look at the lady beside him. He bent his head, lighting a cigarette. Belmont had risen, the better to see the passing vehicle.

“Nick?”

Her voice floated down to him; it had an inquiring inflection. . . . The oblique look and the wrinkled grin which Nick slanted up towards her, twinkling in

the glow from his lit match, was a final confession and surrender.

"I'm rather too abject for you to kick," he said, "also I am very sorry that I told a lie. And I wish—ah, *mon Dieu*, how I wish that we had taken a carriage!"

But Belmont was generous. "It can't be far now," was all her reply.

"I will not try to shake you off again, Belmont. It leads to catastrophe. Besides, I am getting to be an old man; I cannot sing like Borello, nor fly up the mountains like you. Let us go back to Paris!"

"I think we'd better go on to Laurie's first."

Following the directions of an old peasant woman who presently passed them with a load of washing on her head, they soon caught sight of the pink *casetta* with its one sentinel cypress and background of misty olive trees, which was now Laurie's home.

At the same moment they heard Modesta's voice, blending with another, an American voice, the sharp barking of a dog and the wild clucking of hens. In silent agreement they drew back into hiding among the silver-grey trunks of the olives, whence they were able to watch the scene.

Though the house was small, it was casually built up from one terrace to another, and thus it stood on three different heights. Outside the kitchen door was

a loggia; the fixed slab of table in the shadow underneath the lopsided pergola of convolvulus and passion-flower showed where the inmates of the house ate their midday dinner in the heat of noon. On top of the pergola, a few brilliant yellow gourds were sprawling, set to dry in the sun. The vegetable garden ran irregularly up and down hill all around the house. The chickens ran about among the vegetables. A sardonic goat was tethered to a fig-tree in full fruit. The chickens and the goat seemed agitated; so did the American lady, apologising over and over again, in a strange flurried language only just to be recognised as Italian, to Modesta, whose agitation was under control—for, see you, one must profit by these occasions!

Modesta was bareheaded; she wore a short dark cotton frock, sleeveless, and no stockings. Her skin was the colour of smooth golden walnut. Not at all the elegant and civilised Modesta whom Belmont and Nick remembered at their last frivolous champagne dinner in Paris, six months ago.

It was evident that there had recently been a tragedy; a white hen lay dead, its feathers dabbled in blood, on the ground near the little group. A dog was being tightly held by his mistress, and there was blood on his jaw. Modesta, drooping with pathos, was explaining that of all her hens she could least afford to lose just this one, her favourite hen—her husband's

favourite hen, who every day, more punctual than the sun, laid her egg—her two, her three eggs. . . . All the other hens the *signora's* dog might have slain and Modesta would not have cared. But just this particular hen—how would she find courage to tell her husband? The *signora* must see for herself that the loss was irreplaceable—*ebbene*, almost irreplaceable. . . . The American lady opened her handbag. Modesta was asked to state what price she thought fair. The Italian girl's gestures quickened; a bargain was in sight!

"You will see, *signora*, that a so beautiful hen cannot be paid for in *soldi*. Not, at any rate, in less than perhaps seventy-five *lire*?"

"Mee-oh Dee-oh!" cried the American lady. The dog yapped and struggled in her arms.

Ma! But the *signora* had not understood. That hen—it was like a child. It knew Modesta, ran to meet her ahead of all the others when she went out with the bowl of grain. That hen—it would play with the goat like a Christian! "*Povera bestia!* See; he is sad to lose her!" And indeed the goat obligingly drooped, perhaps by dramatic instinct, perhaps for want of cool, wet pasturage, for the earth of the little clearing round the *casetta* was tight and hard, suffering from many months without rain.

Finally, the American paid an extravagant price for the mischief the dog had done. Modesta received the money with a sweet, mournful smile, as who should say, "But what are *soldi* to me, or me to *soldi*?" The American turned to go. Modesta called after her: "Signora!"

Belmont and Nick, who had been prepared to reveal themselves, drew back again.

"Kwuntoe?" asked the American lady, for she had got used to saying "*Quanto?*" over and over again in Italy; her guide-book had informed her that it was a good thing to say.

"The hen. It is yours. You have paid for it. Will you not take it away and have it cooked for your dinner to-morrow?"

So the little profiteer had that much grace and honesty!

The American lady did not think that she could enter her hotel with a dead and mangled hen in her arms. She shuddered, shook her head and hurried away. "*Meno male*—all the better!" murmured Modesta with a shrug; in a businesslike way she picked up the hen and prepared to string it up by the legs upside down from one of the posts of the pergola. Lorenzo would appreciate it cooked in a saucepan, and afterwards there would be the head and liver and giblets to put into a *risotto*, and perhaps la Lisa could

bring up some fungi and a cockscomb to add to it. And she was seventy-five lira to the good, and there were many other favourite hens to lay eggs.

(5)

. . . Nick said, stepping out into the open: "Modesta, be a darling, and hang it somewhere else. We'd like to sit just there, Belmont and I."

"Neeck!" Modesta did not seem very surprised at the apparition. Composure was always her quality most in evidence—and, as a matter of fact, la Lisa had already stolen up to inform her, in hoarse thrilled dialect, of the two *inglese*—she thought they were *inglese*—who had been down at Santa Nucia, inquiring for Lorenzo. Modesta tripped forward, however, and warmly kissed Belmont, and said how she was glad to see *la madre*, for indeed they had not met for a great many months, and would they take any refreshment? Neeck looked hot, *il povero!*—Nick was subtly aware that Modesta was glad to see him looking hot. Would they sit in the *loggia*? She brought out a couple of kitchen chairs, and put them by the table outside, where it was dim and cool. She could have some *minestrone* ready in a few minutes, if that was what *la madre* and Neeck could eat with pleasure? . . . Nick fancied there was a slight flicker of

the eyelashes, though Modesta's expression was demure and inscrutable as ever. The little rogue could not have quite forgotten, after eight months' training in the customs of English and American high society, that on a hot day, after a tiresome climb, they would not be craving to see the lid come off that great pot of steaming soup which nearly always stood in preparation on the stove, soup almost solid with coarse macaroni, cabbage and onions and big plum-brown beans. He grimaced slightly at the very thought of it. Modesta's innocent gaze met Belmont's, and they both smiled. . . .

"We'd like a melon very much better than anything else," suggested Belmont, for she saw that they were growing here and there all over the garden, ripe tempting yellow globes, lying as though tumbled haphazard on the dry ground; cucumbers too, and small purple melanzini. And there were plants of sweet pepper, and some last tomatoes; bright green and golden fruits everywhere—green and rich gold and scarlet, geraniums falling in cascades over all the terrace walls; and carnations flopping out of broken earthenware pots at every window. A few of the orange trees were in bloom too. Rather a jolly little farm, Modesta's! Belmont wondered how she came to be here, and whether she were contented. She asked, tentatively, where was Laurie? And Nick, limply

broken across the table, sat upright to hear the tone of the answer:

"Lorenzo," said Modesta, reverently, as she set down between them the melon which she had just picked, and a couple of rough plates and one knife—"Lorenzo will be home this evening. I do not know. . . . He is perhaps at the *trattoria* in Nucia Castello, where there is *fiesta*, or perhaps playing bowls, or he is tasting the wine from Arturo Simone's last week's *racolta*. That is more possible. I do not know, I. *Il povero*, he has been all the morning digging holes to put in the new peach trees, and the ground it is hard, hard, hard. We want rain. And in two days is the *vendemia*. Some have already gathered their grapes, but ours, they still hang—*vede?*"

And she pointed out to them a slope of thick green vines at a little distance, the lines carefully bound to their wires, and drooping with their load of dark grapes. Some of the tallest spirals were already curling into vivid yellow tips.

"It is a beautiful vineyard," said Modesta, proudly; "and they will make beautiful wine. Lorenzo is very practical for the vines, he."

Nick and Belmont dared not exchange glances. Neither wished to betray to the other their astonishment at the metamorphosis of Modesta.

"Yes, but my child," Nick protested, "we want to

see Laurie. We've both come a long way to see him. Surely you can find him for us?"

Belmont chimed in: "Or send down a servant with a message?"

"There are no servants. There is no need. We have a peasant—Luigi Amadeo—who helps Lorenzo to turn up the earth round the olives, and when there is spraying; but all that is over now. Servants," Modesta ran on contemptuously, "they eat and they eat; they sleep and they sleep. And into their eating and their sleeping run all your profits. Lorenzo and I adjust ourselves without servants. . . ."

And Belmont thought of an embroidered lilac silk eiderdown, and Modesta curled up voluptuously beneath it, and Mitchell bringing in the breakfast-tray with chocolate poured into thin Sèvres china.

Nick was becoming impatient. It was certain that he and Modesta did not like each other any better now than in London and later in Paris:

"You must at least be able to tell us where he is!"

"He does not tell me," said Modesta. "When he returns home I am glad. When he goes out I do not complain."

The sun had shifted its direction; it now struck past the pergola and through the open kitchen door, on to a great heap of onions, shining mauve and fawn and crisp silver, thrown in a corner of the floor for

drying. Modesta stood behind this ray of sun, looking down nonchalantly upon the visitors from the outside world, as they ate melon and drank the water that she had brought them in a tipsy wine flask. Suddenly Belmont was stricken by a sense of loneliness which hung about the child. She still could not understand what had happened; but it was pathetic that Modesta, so exquisite, so disdainful, should now be found without servants, without luxuries; set down roughly against this extremely picturesque, but hardly comfortable background of onions and *minestrone*, gourds and goats and grapes, and then a frieze of olive trees, their fruit just turning from grey-green to black, and behind them the blue sky . . . and Lorenzo perhaps here, perhaps there. Belmont was conscious of a rush of anger on Modesta's behalf. She rose and put an arm round her shoulders:

"Modesta, need we pretend any more? I can't guess whether Laurie's gone mad, or what's happened, or why you've stayed here all this time, but—oh! you poor darling, you must be aching to be rescued!" And Belmont's laugh at the high-flown word broke very near to tears. "You'll come back with us now we're here to fetch you, won't you? Back to our flat in Knightsbridge? You were happy there, I know."

"Si," Modesta assented calmly. "It was a very nice apartment, in very good taste."

. . . Nick quickly turned his head away and stared out to sea. Modesta's condescension was superb. It tickled his humour, and he felt rather sorry for Belmont, who, as yet undaunted, pursued her good intention.

"Then you'll be glad to come home? You must have missed . . . oh! dozens of things that you can't get here. Darling, why did you never let me know? Why didn't you write?"

A smile faintly ironic tilted the corners of Modesta's mouth. So *la madre* had forgotten that her son's wife was a peasant, with a peasant's limitations. *Ebbene!* She had been always kind. Modesta loved her, but without enthusiasm now, for all her love was flowing in one direction, and could not be diverted.

"It must have been terribly hard for you, and you're just wonderfully brave to make the best of it, but of course it can't go on."

"That," said Modesta calmly, "must be as Lorenzo wishes." Steadily she confronted them with her new code—the old code which had lain dormant in her blood all the while that her chivalrous young husband had indulged her and spoilt her and bought her gold and silver dresses, had treated her as a social and intellectual equal. . . .

"As Lorenzo wishes," murmured Nick, beginning to understand rather sooner than Belmont. For though

his boots and his habits were urban, and even Parisian, his own mother had been Marie from a Provençal farm.

“Why not as *you* wish?” cried Belmont, hating this new Lorenzo, who sounded so little like Laurie.

Modesta dropped her lids reprovingly. These foreign ladies—*molto elegante*, yes!—but they did not know how a woman should behave towards a good husband. Standing there at the kitchen door, her hands on her hips, the shaft of heavy sunshine slanting between them like a barrier, slanting in glory on the onions, she delivered a short lecture on duty, humility; and the relative positions of wife and husband. She spoke well and sincerely of the need in a wife not to ask questions, not to worry him with her unreasonable demands, when already he had been working hard, and was tired, and needed his ease and his food and drink and the company of men.

When she had spoken what she had to say without interruption, she announced that she must go now and fetch her washing in and iron it, so perhaps *la madre* would excuse her?—and Neeck, he would excuse her? . . . But the different stress conveyed very clearly that it did not matter whether Nick excused her or not. And would they please remain resting there in the shade for as long as they wished? For they were very welcome. And after they had gone,

and when Lorenzo returned, she would tell him where *la madre* and Nick were staying in Santa Nucia; doubtless *l'albergo dei Tre Fratelli*—Nick nodded in answer to the question—and if Lorenzo pleased and if it suited his arrangements and if he could so adjust himself, he would come down to them. For it was nature that a son should want to see his mother after so long a time apart.

. . . Exit then Modesta, to pluck Lorenzo's blue shirts from off the line which stretched crookedly between a tall pine and a blossoming yellow rose tree. Nick and Belmont watched her for a while; and then, when the afternoon was a little cooler, they rose and went down the mule-track, back to Santa Nucia and the *Tre Fratelli*. Here, on the broad first-floor balcony, with only some dusty palm trees between them and the sea, they waited, still dazed and chastened by Modesta's treatment, for Modesta's lord to call upon them.

CHAPTER IV

(1)

LAURIE arrived soon after sundown. He was looking magnificent, but unhappy. He greeted Belmont as though her presence were a further perplexity in a situation which was already beyond any simple adjustment. Belmont felt that even while he kissed her affectionately, and called himself various names for having left her so long without news of him, that he was a stranger. He had gone away not only from London and from Paris, but had crossed unregretfully into some older civilisation than the one with which she had surrounded him. It was no good pretending that Laurie was hers any more.

“*Eh bien, mon petit!*” said Nick, looking back and up at the massive six-foot-two which brooded over him, hands laid powerfully on his shoulders. “And what about this hell-of-a-mess? What have you been doing to Modesta?”

“Modesta’s going to have a child,” said Laurie.

Nick laughed. “That wasn’t exactly what I meant. . . . Still, felicitations!” Then he stopped laughing, seeing the trouble which clouded Laurie’s eyes.

"What am I to do? Nick, don't you see what it means? I've got to give up all this!"

And "all this" did not mean the balcony of the *Tre Fratelli*, the palms and the Mediterranean. Nick and Belmont had seen for themselves, and now their imaginations saw again for a brief flash, the pink house on the hill among the olives, and Modesta saying: "That must be as Lorenzo wishes!" And, even before he told them, they were convinced that here, by accident perhaps, perhaps by intention, Laurie had found his eternal content upon earth. During the years before he had been merely blind and boisterous.

He went on, not eloquently indeed, but looking beseechingly from one face to the other, seeking for help again. . . . He had not needed help from that night onwards when he had sat outside Fouquet's in the Champs Élysées:

"I didn't mean to stay here, you know. It was just a rag . . . well, no, a good deal more than ragging. Modesta had to be brought to her senses somehow. It was spoiling her, living like Belmont in England, and having servants and thinking herself all the *signoras* of the world rolled into one."

Nick nodded. "Yes. It was spoiling her. All her sweetness curling up into arrogance. She's all right now."

"Yes." Laurie's voice broke into tenderness. "She's a blessed little darling now. You saw her."

"How did you do it?" asked Nick curiously.

Laurie grinned.

"Ever heard of the 'Taming of the Shrew'? Wise fellow, Will Shakespeare."

"I could swear that you did it well, Petruchio!"

"You'd swear right!" Laurie answered. "Better than you could have done, Nick, although you're an actor."

And for a few moments he forgot what was weighing him down, as he lightly described the abduction.

"Borello doesn't believe that you're married, you two."

At once Laurie ceased to be care-free. "No. That's just it. I pretended to forget our marriage. I went blank about it."

Belmont suddenly looked straight across at him. She did not speak; but Laurie interpreted the frosty disdain in her narrowed glance, and braced himself against it.

"You think that no man should let down his wife to that extent? You think I was a cad, that I went too far simply because I was enjoying it all? You're wrong, you know. I *had* to be drastic. Enjoying it was just a side-line. Well, one needn't always be austere and miserable, even on a sort of crusade. If I'd let

them all believe out here, her relations and her pals, that I'd married Modesta, then they'd have kow-towed, and nothing would have prevented them, and she'd still be strutting about like a blooming *signora*, talking about the season at Monte Carlo."

"The boy's right," said Nick. "But look here, Laurie—hasn't it lasted long enough? You needn't go on with the comedy for ever."

Again Laurie repeated: "That's just it. I want to go on for ever. I want to! I can't bear the thought of any other existence now!"

His reticence broke down, and it all rolled out of him, an amazing confession.

He had never been really happy before. He could not ever imagine himself as happy again. His only desire was to remain permanently in his own *casetta*, with an obedient peasant wife, in an atmosphere of patriarchal tradition. It was not so much the actual work and way of living that fascinated him, that claimed him, though these, too, he loved; digging under a hot blue sky; keenly attending to his vineyards and his olives; eating the sturdy pungent food, and drinking wine that was a flame in the throat; wearing a sleeveless cotton shirt and shorts, with the pleasant warmth on his bare head and legs; haranguing, bargaining or carolling with his companions of the wine-shop—all these things were good to

Laurie, and more than good. . . . But also . . . he struggled to express his meaning—but also, and more mysteriously, it seemed natural to him; his blood tingled and responded not only to the small daily events of such a life, its ease and simplicity; but even more to the final tradition that a man is master in his own home, and that she who makes his bed and cooks his food should also be his wife and bear his children.

“Well?” asked Nick, for Laurie had come to a halt. “So you never found out what you really were until you began to act what you were not. It is an amusing incident. . . . *Voilà!* But why do you sit there frowning so dolorously at your own knees?”

“Look here, Nick—*what is it?* Am I a freak? Am I mad? I can’t bear to be a freak! I’ve no right to settle down in this way, now that there’s a child on the road. I’m no snob, but—— Good God! It’s against my class, against my race, everything! I can’t possibly let my child be born and brought up on a rough farm in Italy, as though there were nothing better for him!”

“Ah, I see!” Nick’s face creased up into tender yet mocking comprehension. “Oxford—the Royal Society of Architects—God and my Country—‘A gentleman always puts on evening dress even when there’s no dinner but a roll and a table-napkin’—is that it?”

Laurie turned impatiently away from Nick to Belmont: “You see what I mean? A man can’t let down

his wife?—Well, a man can't let down his mother either."

(2)

Belmont, leaning outward over the balcony's edge, watched a tiny village by the sea in the east lose its last smouldering red from the sun already hidden behind the western hills. As though from a huge but invisible magnet, the light was sucked up and up, away from the sea . . . away from the sharp roofs and peaks and the church spire . . . and now the mountain behind it was suffused in quivering glory . . . and now only half of it . . . and now a burning cap fitted over the round top.

And that was sucked up too, and gone, leaving the wine-hued ranges dark.

She thought: "I've lost him, and it doesn't matter. It wouldn't have mattered at any moment during the last twenty-four years." How ridiculous . . . to choose someone and call him something—call him a dearly loved son, for instance!—and never once to see that he's a dummy, an obsession, a silly dragging dream gone dead on you. Only just one thing you can do . . . only it won't be easy, in front of Nick! . . . If only the magical "after" could be whisked round and happen to you before the difficult thing was done. . . . But after, she could feel light and gay and

newly awakened. . . . Shakespeare's Beatrice—they had just spoken his name—perhaps she, too, could be reborn under the spin of a star.

But, oh, the *silliness* of the lie she had told; the exasperating monstrous silliness! And there he sat, this red-headed hulk of a man, talking of her as though she were his mother.

(3)

“A man can't let down his mother either. Hell, I'm being an infernal prig! I don't know how to put it. But I've had a decent education, and I've had you moving about round me, delicate and clean and born high. One's got to live up to that sort of thing, or else you're just . . . just what I said—an exile, an outsider, not belonging anywhere. All this tomfoolery will have to be smashed now. We'll go back with you at once, Modesta and I. Oh, I'm sorry, I'm damned sorry! I've made a mess of it all! I'll settle down again soon and forget all this. I don't know. . . . Seen from here, the prospect looks so flabby; there's no salt in it. . . . Getting up and dressing and going to old Groome's; drawing town halls; coming home and being told the child is with his nurse in another suite, and can't be seen until his hands have been

washed. And Modesta . . . I can't remember how I felt about her then, before I began to care."

Nick interrupted the outburst: "*Mon gars*, do not deny your whole past emotions! You married Modesta because you adored her!"

"I didn't!" Laurie shouted, losing control. "I was a wild, silly young ass, and I married her because I had romantic ideas. Romance—she killed all that over and over again, and especially in the dress-maker's atelier that time in Paris. But something different began out here. She's the woman I've always wanted as she is now. As she is now. It's no good. I can't be a freak. My son, or even my daughter, will have to be brought up decent. I've realised that. Good God! They'd believe here that he was a bastard!"

Nick's eyes twinkled. "That cuts no bones," he remarked quaintly, losing his English. "*Moi-même*, I am a bastard, and am I not deeply respected by all?" Then he added: "Well, but that one lie of yours, anyway, if nothing else, will have to be contradicted."

"Everything else!" from Laurie, perversely choosing to use a bigger hammer than was actually needed.

"Why? You're a fanatic!"

"I'm a swine! I've blundered. It's got to stop. I've been putting it off and putting it off, trying to find excuses, till Modesta told me, four days ago. . . . I

knew then that I couldn't put it off any longer. It isn't fair. The kid's got a heritage after all."

"So has Modesta! You have taken her back to hers. You have no right to keep on dragging her to and fro, from one world to another."

"Oh, she's adaptable." Laurie's voice was ironic. "She'll find it easy to become a *signora* again. This will seem like a dream. She's happy enough now—she'd be happy enough if it went on, but in time she'll talk of it as a bad dream."

"And you?" Nick scrutinised him intently. "A man can't live against nature, you know, and live well."

"You've hit it! Look at my mother!" Again he threw out his hands towards Belmont. "Look at her! Hasn't she a right to be fastidious about me? About my child? About my career? She'd be proud, wouldn't she, of a peasant grandson? *Look* at her, Nick! If I'm a freak, well, I've got to fight it down, haul it out, conquer it somehow. A man *can't* live against nature!"

He sank his head down on his hands.

. . . Belmont saw, as through a mirror that was cracking in all directions, that now she must give in. Laurie was desperately unhappy, swinging the course of his ship by a false star that was only painted on the sky. She had held out for so many years. She could not hold out any longer. For there was one way

only to comfort him: to tell him that his desire to live in a more primitive and uncomplicated way than she had ever been able to offer him herself was normal and hereditary, and came straight down to him without a swerve from the Hungarian beet-growers and vine-owners that were his ancestors, from the patriarchal Jew who was his grandfather. She would have to tell him now. She had got to the end of what she could inflict on the boy. The mirror into which she had gazed with such wilful persistence was cracking now, in lines of sharp silver. She would have to turn away from it, and face reality instead, and face Laurie . . . now.

But rushing only by the breadth of a wire ahead of Belmont's "Now . . ." rushing into the silence which lay on all three of them, came Nick's voice. A very cool, a very casual voice. Nick, breaking his promise to Belmont, and his second promise to Belmont:

"*Mon petit*, you need not suffer over this. You are not a freak. You inherit it all through your mother, that is all. You are quite simply beating your way back."

Laurie lifted his head and looked incredulously at Belmont.

"Belmont is only your stepmother," said Nick.

(4)

. . . "And that's all he cares about us!" Nick remarked ruefully, after Laurie had left them—a radiant Laurie, intent only on reaching his home and Modesta.

"That's all he cares about us."

For Laurie had lingered on no conventional pretences. He had hurled questions at Nick, one impatient question after another; for he wanted facts, he wanted the truth, and the psychology of the matter did not concern him. As for Belmont, after one blazing look, he had not troubled about her any more. It was almost impossible to believe that he could shed with so much ease the legend which had been packed about him for so many years. Belmont had been slipped off as Nick in his turn was slipped off—five minutes longer for Nick, because Nick could tell him more. As for bothering about why Belmont should have pretended he was her son, why she had pretended she was his mother ever since he was a baby, those answers were superfluous to Laurie, on fire to be assured that he could stop on his little farm up there, because for him, a man of peasant stock, whose grandfathers in Central Europe had trimmed their vines and sold their beets for sugar, it was normal and right

that, reverting to type, he should do the same for ever while he lived. During a lull in his impatience, Nick had told him a little about Elena, but that was a concession for sentiment's sake. It was plain that Laurie did not really want to know. He wanted to get on with what was alive and what was coming towards him. Elena, his mother, that pretty dark Hungarian girl with the soft eyes, lay twenty-five years back in Carey Town, and Carey Town itself was marooned in the past, an island of half-tones with the twilight round it. Elena laughing with her infant son . . . Nick's voice shook ever so slightly. But Laurie had never felt more rich, more vigorous, more potential than to-day. He was hardly amazed at the news about himself, for he had had news about himself, though not so definitely outlined, when he first came to Santa Nucia to live his life of masquerade, six months ago. He had had the shock, then, of news about himself; and Nick had sealed it for him with actuality. He owed nothing to Belmont. In fact, as he was not her own son, he could not continue to take money from her, nor a partnership in an architect's business. As he was not her son, he must earn his own bread—and a small farm on the Ligurian hills was good enough. You didn't have to do much to olives except dig them round and spray them and cut away the old wood to leave room for the new, and then gather in your

harvest when November and December came round, and sell it profitably, haggling, shouting, shrugging, despairing, the sale ratified at last over two beakers of your own new wine. . . . That would be the way of it! That would be the pageantry of his life from now onwards! Laurie's spirit leapt and then prostrated itself in an ecstasy of thankfulness, before a living vision of Modesta amid a cluster of her babies, half naked, sepia in the shadow of the loggia—golden in the streaming sunshine beyond . . . what wonder that he could not stay now to ponder and worry over the whys of Belmont? What did they matter? She had held him by no emotion stronger than habit. When that snapped, nobody was hurt; not he, at any rate. . . . He did not even inquire after Belmont's pain. She did not belong to him. Far away in the distance, a whole lot had been going on in her brain, in her soul perhaps, for years and years and years; and out of all that had been going on, she had called him her son; and now—now a whole lot more might or might not be happening, but what was that to Laurie? He was off. He did not feel resentment; nor did he feel gratitude. He just did not feel anything laborious at all, only that he wanted to verify and then be done with it. The moment was too tense for courtesy; otherwise, perhaps, Laurie might have stayed to bestow it, for he was not a boor, and materially Belmont had

given him a lot. Good old Nick, though!—decent fellow Nick! He had come at once, when Laurie wired, and had told him what he most wanted to know. “Good-bye, Nick!” Laurie was on fire to be off. Laurie had gone, happy as a man who had seen the sun rise for the first time. Curiously, callously happy. That was the way to accept a miracle. Dry rock that jets a sudden stream of water—dry wood that puts out a bright green leaf—well, after all, the fig tree did it year after year, writhing in passionate silver from the chinks of their well . . . a short trudge from the house, for Modesta, Modesta balancing the pitcher like an Egyptian on her small black head; her face calm, because, thanks to the saints, there was still a dark glimmer at the bottom of their well, though so many others were dried up. June, July, August, pressing down on them without rain. Yet rain was drawing nearer now—to-morrow perhaps, or the day after. But he would gather his grapes in first . . . up there, up there with Modesta, and then it could rain—*blue!* blue and scarlet! It could rain cherries and apricots and bright green frogs! What a glorious world! Hallelujah! . . . and “Good-bye, Nick!”

“And that’s all he cares about us!” Nick remarked, ruefully, watching Laurie go.

Then he turned, knowing that he would not have to wait for Belmont's wrath.

(5)

There it was, as he had expected, meeting him, blinding him; lightning over snow, if that were possible; the whirl of cool soft snow, flash after flash of indignation. Only—it was strange!—he had broken his promise to her, two promises. No wonder, then, that he had to confront this storm. He tried to say, only she would not let him, that he was sorry for the violation; that though wilfully he had broken these promises, for Laurie's state of mind had urgently demanded it, he was aware that by doing so he had exiled himself for ever outside all promising. He saw his plight dwindled to the proportions of a warm little room with striped walls, full of people cosily whispering succulent secrets to tantalise him, he mooching disconsolately outside the casements, even outside the railings beyond the casement: "Don't tell Nick. Nick doesn't understand about promises. Nick won't keep promises. So don't believe him if he says 'I promise.' "

. . . Yes, a promise was, after all, a needful element in the abstract world, a stopper on evaporation, a sort of gum that held confidence together, a pledge and a final reassurance; without it, life scattered and crum-

bled and broke in all directions. Nick realised that well enough. He tried to tell Belmont that he was willing to accept the penalty and not complain. He tried—it was impossible through the storm.

Yet somehow, gradually, he realised that she was not raging at him for breaking a mere promise or two—for so might the witch-woman fling away her torn webs, declaring them useless. No—but he had broken them too soon, too soon! Couldn't he have trusted her? For she was going to tell Laurie herself, of course she was! Could there have been any doubt about it? But Nick, the fool, the officious mountebank, Nick, had thwarted her. It was not his *business*, at that climax, to speak! It was hers, her only way of atonement, and that no more than a rag of it . . . but still—he might have left it to her! No more than the breadth of a thin wire between silence and speech, but Nick had leapt in first. Oh, he had been right so often! She might have spoken so often. She had let the lie live on all this time in spite of Nick—Nick, always her unwanted monitor and judge; Nick, who had always criticised her, mocked her, outwitted and hated her. . . .

So Belmont raged.

But why had the crystal shattered on just this note? Nick wondered, a little dazed. And while he wondered, the note changed:

“You’re hurt because Laurie went off without caring. As though that mattered. Only, Nick—I don’t care either, not a puff of a feather. I saw him go; he won’t come back, ever. It ought to have broken me. If what I’ve been doing for half my life were worth anything, it *would* have broken me, finally. You’d have heard me calling after him: ‘Laurie! Laurie!’ . . . listen, isn’t that how a tragic actress would have called? Well—but I might just as well not have planned and lied, been afraid and vigilant, if, when I lose, I don’t care! And for the sake of that I’ve built up—grottoes of dishonesty, and you’ve seen me live in them!”

Belmont could not go on. For this was what mattered—not Laurie’s happy-go-lucky desertion. But that for Laurie she should have forfeited Nick, squeezed him out of her dwelling, and out of London . . . cunning contrivances to send him away, again and again, and keep him away, and not be there when he returned; his youthful desire to be an actor cleverly exploited; a “Gallic temperament” created which would never succeed in England. . . . And all the while Nick seeing through her, despising her; Nick, her mocking, teasing, unresting tormentor—but beneath that outward show of bright antagonism, pleading with her always, to give it up . . . and be decent. . . .

Belmont knew that all her admirably picturesque years of a tender mother with her only son could not be set in value against one splinter, one folded leaf of that interlude in Paris, exquisite spring and summer, while she was supposed to be just waiting and waiting for Laurie to return to her.

"Oh, Nick, Nick, let's go back. To Paris, where we were civilised and graceful and . . . enchanted. Here—it's nothing but cataclysms. It terrifies me. It's—down to hard rock. Like Laurie when he dashed off just now without pretending. It appalls, it terrifies me. In Paris I found out so clearly how to be natural. . . . Nick, how queer, only to become natural during the time when I was giving a performance!"

She paused to listen . . . while the echo went up: her American friends fluting commiseration: "Poor darling Belmont—she's going through such a worrying time over that son of hers—yes, he's behaving *too* queerly . . . doesn't write or anything, and nobody knows what he's doing. . . . She dare not move away from Paris in case at any moment he should want her. Of course, she's simply *racked* with anxiety all the time. Yes, my dear, sitting there on a knife-edge waiting . . . and acting just beautifully."

Acting—just beautifully.

A large red moon swung cautiously over the rim of the sea, and swung itself slowly upwards free of

tether. It was so large and so red and so inquisitive that Belmont felt hysterically that she could not bear it. Every single thing in this Italy was crude and unashamed. That raw moon—as callous, in its way, as Laurie’s departure. They were all united to break down her reticence. To break *her* down. She must get away from that moon, lest she uncovered ever more and more of herself—before Nick’s sweet pitying brown eyes . . .

“Nick—back to Paris—to-night—*can’t* we? Oh, Nick, let me do something for you. I must give you a present. I never have, you see . . . never without exactions. Please, let me buy you ‘Les Neiges d’Antan.’ You wanted it.” She threw out her hands towards him, appealing for his bounty. They were flowing over with gifts—would he allow her to be bountiful?

Nick remained silent; he took her hands, and he was smiling a little, too, as he absently gazed into their palms. Belmont had such lovely hands. They curved irresistibly as a wave has learnt to curve. Nick kissed the palm first of one and then the other, not in courtesy nor in homage, but as though simply he saluted an event still invisible to her.

“Then you *will* let me buy it for you?” cried Belmont, childishly pleased. But Nick shook his head. And she wrenched her hands away from him, and tore herself away from that blare of red moon and

that blare of silent shining sea beyond and below the balcony, and went into the *salone* of the *Tre Fratelli*, which was hateful and square and competently lit by unshaded electric lights. It had a checkerboard marble floor, and a round table and four hard chairs and four doors, one at each corner. Not a room for voluptuous collapses. And there Nick followed and found her, weeping hoarsely and miserably—weeping not in dropped pearls any more, but as any woman weeps in the streets when she is finally beaten down and does not care who sees it.

Everything was gone. She was alone. She had lost. Lost Laurie, and lost the belief that she cared about losing Laurie.

“Won’t I do instead?” asked Nick, very gently.

“. . . No,” Belmont whispered, after a long silence.

“You love me far, far better than Laurie, you know. You always have, from the very beginning.”

“Not as a son.”

Belmont was being dead honest at last.

She lifted her head, and pushed back her mist of hair. But she did not, could not look at the man to whom she was making desperate confession. For that was just the overwhelming strangeness of it. . . . Not any more Nick. Not little adopted Nick, but a man.

“And that’s why you won’t do instead of Laurie, my dear. Nick, I don’t see you, I don’t *feel* you as a son. For it’s no good. I dare not start another era of false posturing. I’ve—got a horror of it now. Tableau after tableau of brooding motherhood. . . . Mater-nity—a sort of symbolic statue hewn out skilfully for this year’s Salon d’Automne. I love you too passionately to make you a victim, a sort of sham property piece. Laurie—Laurie was different!” Oh, she might have known that if Laurie had really found a home in her bones and in her soul, she could never have borne to use him as she had, to push a false claim. “But it all ran so smoothly and beautifully for years and years and years. . . . That ought to have warned me that neither of us was feeling anything at all. But whenever you came anywhere I was troubled—and I enjoyed sacrificing you because you troubled me so. . . . And here I am, and I’ve been forced to tell you I’m in love with you—mad for you—you, Nick, my ‘other son’—the left-out one—you who so utterly despised my reasons for leaving you out. I’ve made a farce of being a mother twice over . . . it’s not a thing you can cheat about.”

Wrung out of Belmont, tortured out of her. Fluency faints and dies when a gracious, elusive, fragrant lady ceases to be that lady. She delivered up her news to Nick without any draped accessories, without

subtlety to help her, or a merciful background; delivered it up as though he had her on the rack.

And Nick answered:

"But I've always loved you like that. Not as though I were your son, ever. Even when I was fourteen and small for my age. You've let yourself be hoodwinked by your fable of Garnett-my-husband-and-our-two-adopted-boys. It was because I've always loved you like that, Belmont, that I had to fight you and fight you, and wait and wait and smash my promises . . . and be forgiven for smashing them." His arms were round her, his mouth against her eyelids. . . . "Belmont?"

"I'll bind no more promises on anyone," she sighed, worn out, but yielding to the miracle that brought content. "Oh, Nick—are you a magician? How could you have known so surely what I've only just found out? Nick, you're too young—I'm too old——"

"Why—eight years, sweetheart—what's that to fling down between us?"

"Between us? As though there were nothing else."

More mature in chivalry than the boy Laurie dashing to the rescue of a serving-maid, more subtle in his ways of taming, Nick sought for what would be of use to her, and found it—no ornament, but a warm wrap for her forlorn dignity:

"Only one thing else. And you'll forgive me that too, because you're generous. I should have trusted you, of course I should, to tell Laurie yourself just now. I should have guessed, for certain, that you were on the very edge of it. Guessed?—known. But rushing in ahead of you like that—impulsive is too kind a name. Call it officious; call me a dense officious fool—but you'll forgive me, Belmont—as you love me?"

Yes. . . . She could lift her head now; breathe, and not feel the harsh air scrape upon a wound. Soft benign air . . . provided by Nick!

"Then you do believe it . . . that I meant to tell him myself, if you had left me the chance? Oh, Nick, *always* believe that! Promise me that you'll always believe it? Nick," Belmont pleaded, "it matters so much to me . . . Promise?"

Nick smiled. . . .

PART FOUR

CHAPTER I

(1)

THE Borello family were a humming hive of questions. For il Lorenzo had had the audacity, he, to invite them up to a *festa* at his own *casetta*, high among the olives. He had asked them, not to a banquet at the *albergo*, where men might go and drink much wine and not meet Modesta, *povera figlia*, who was a sinner, and therefore stayed humbly in her home as good sinners should; but, ignoring the scandal which had pronounced the daughter of Borello an outlaw from her kin, he had blandly bidden his guests up to the very home itself: Borello and the wife of Borello, Rosina and la Lisa, and the aunt of Modesta, who was the sister of the wife of Borello. "But we will not go! Never, never! *Mai, mai, mai, mai, MAI!*" cried Borello, going forth to brandish the news abroad of his own superb implacability. "We will not even mention that we are invited."

But in the streets of Santa Nucia, and in the shops, and in the bowling alley, and at the café tables, and among the *giovanotti* lounging up against the sea-wall, he discovered the same news already flourished

from tongue to tongue; for they had all received the same invitation from il Lorenzo: the barber and his daughter; the man who worked the gates of the *livello*; the owner of the *pasticceria* shop, with his wife and mother and father and two sons, not forgetting the promised spouse of the younger son; Taddeo and his mother, and three other cabmen, all, alas for them! bachelors, and therefore subject to the tax. And from this largesse of invitations, several most exciting facts emerged which presently swelled out into a fine aerial castle for gossip. For all those who could play an instrument, and thus roughly build themselves into an improvised band, were especially bidden to bring guitar and fiddle, concertina, mandoline and castanets. Then there would be music? Dancing? It was to be an evening of merriment? What did he think then, that one—il Lorenzo? That the virtue of Santa Nucia could so easily forget? Ah, *la povera* Modesta! But—and here came the second significant fact—discussed with terrific volubility and uninhibited gesture: a cake had been especially ordered at the *pasticceria*; outside it, sugar icing and candied fruits, and winding in and out of the rococo architecture, the names of Lorenzo and Modesta intertwined with “Amore” and arsenic green hearts and arrows. “Yes, especially commanded *cosi!*” So said the pastry-cook. *Dio mio*

—*Corpo di Bacco!—che vergogna!* . . . a wedding-cake!

But—most exciting of the triple tidings, a banner that floated from the ramparts of the aerial castle: the priest had been invited. The priest—*il padre* himself. “Has he accepted? Is he going?” “*Ma, si, si, si, si, si!*”—yes, he was going! Trust the *padre*! He enjoyed music and wine and cake and the simple performance of good deeds, and it might be that that very evening he would be called upon to unite these two, who should have been united more than a year ago; whose hearts now, by the grace of the Saints, had been mysteriously softened. *Ma si*, the *padre* was going, and with much pleasure.

“Then,” said Borello, firmly “I will also go.” For it was not right that great deeds should be performed and Borello not there to inspire or denounce them, whichever aspect came uppermost. Borello went, wearing his nautical cap; and the wife of Borello, and Rosina and la Lisa, and the aunt of Modesta, who was the sister of the wife of Borello, all in their holiday clothes. And the priest went; and the man who opened and shut the gates at the level crossing, and also played the concertina, doubtless with the same practised movement; and all the others who had been invited trooped up to the small pink house among the olives, and also two or three who had not been invited, but

hoped fervently that il Lorenzo would not notice in the general hectic rejoicing. And because Lorenzo had been so obliging as to include three cab-drivers, many of the guests were able to drive up in heaps, singing and chattering, and wondering where was Taddeo and his bony white horse?

But Taddeo had already been up there all day, with Perrone, and a whole troupe of Perrone's children. They had been gathering the grapes, flinging them into a shallow earthenware conk on the topmost terrace outside the house, hilariously trampling them with bare feet, and then toppling them into the vat where they remained fermenting. Modesta had not been able to help, except every now and then, when she rushed out from the kitchen, and sprang laughing on to the bruised juicy mass, and then ran lightly back again to her great preparations for the *fiesta*. But even she did not know what good reason had animated Laurie to issue all these invitations, and to order so much splendid food, so many flasks of strong Barolo and Barbera wine. She knew even less than the rest of the company, stewing in their expectancy down in Santa Nucia, for he had not told her that the priest was invited, and la Lisa had not been up for two days, for she was patiently trying to wash away, with draughts of hot wine and herbs, a blow of the wind, so that she might be well enough for the *fiesta*.

And Modesta, who had once despised the gaiety that could only be provided by a village *festa*, village music and a cake from the *pasticceria*; who, in the days when she was serving-maid at the Rices' villa, had tilted up her small nose at Rosina for enjoying these diversions, Modesta was all that day the happiest little soul, anticipating the moment when her family and her friends should be seated on benches round the long stone table under the pergola; the electric lights that Lorenzo had fixed so cleverly among the convolvulus canopy, flaring down upon *antipasta*, sardines and olives and anchovies and small cold mushrooms, flippantly decorated with geranium and little snippets of lemon blossom; upon the round pink freckled slices of salami on a flat dish; upon a big bowl of *insalata* of garlic and onions and radish and beet-root and *finocchi*, upon the nuts and raisins and dried figs, and upon that marvel of a cake. "What a banquet!" thought Modesta proudly, and all provided by Laurie and prepared by her. And best of all, *la mamma* would be coming! Strange that her father should have allowed that.

And then quite suddenly, and already when the first crunch of wheels and shrill of voices were heard ascending the hill, she remembered what she had been too busy to remember all day, that she was not justified in feeling proud; that she had no right, in fact,

to feel proud at all; for these people who were coming up to the feast believed that she was not a wife, and were only accepting her hospitality perhaps in curiosity, perhaps in cruelty. Not a wife? She was not sure herself. . . . Lorenzo had said . . . and Lorenzo knew so many things.

Yes, she was sure. The memory was too clear for a dream, but—Modesta sighed. He was the husband, and next year he would be the father. And at the thought a small pang shot through her heart, like the symbolical arrow through one of the green hearts on that marvel of a cake. . . .

And then, in amazement, she saw *il padre* arriving in the first of the cabs, as it rounded the last bend of the road, where the mule-track met it. *Il padre?*

.

Never, never, never, Modesta swore to herself, never if she lived to be a million, would she cease to recall that one illuminated moment towards the end of supper.

Everyone was already a little flushed and sprawling in the warm scented air, and the guitars and mandolines were already being tuned, and the waiting horses with their cabs attached had decided they might as well wander down the road, as nobody wanted them, and had to be recalled with many "Whoops!" and "Holas!" and "Yipppppps! And

after all that, Lorenzo had risen from his seat at the head of the table, and had invited all of them—Borello and *il padre* and all of them—to drink to the health of Modesta and himself, for it was the first anniversary of their wedding-day.

Modesta would never forget it.

One could not blame his visitors for being frankly incredulous. For, hitherto, had he not denied it himself? But into the stir and shout and tumult of hands and voices which followed his dramatic announcement, Laurie had thrown down, as a rock into agitated waters, their marriage lines.

Mâ-che!—Then he had had them all the time?

The visitors hurled themselves upon this certificate of respectability. Few of them could read, and certainly none of them could read English handwriting. “Give it to *il padre!*” someone had the sense to exclaim. *Il padre* pronounced benevolently, after spelling out Laurence Ferrier’s name and Modesta’s underneath it, that all was in order, and that he wished the young couple much happiness and many, many children.

“Yes,” added Borello, deciding that his authority was required to support the priest. “It is certainly in order.” He glanced gravely down the parchment. “It is all exactly as I would have wished my daughter to be married, I.”

And he embraced Modesta, whilst round them, and between them, and over their heads, and wreathing their feet, the congratulations seethed and bubbled like the grapes in the vat. *Dio!* The kissing and the drinking, and the quantity of wine that was spilt on the cloth, and the richness of the cake! And later, how they danced! Modesta more than any, for she was resuscitated and respectable . . . so she danced as if little wings sprouted from her narrow ankles—and suddenly, how strange! she remembered compassionately the mother of Nick: Marie, ah, *la povera!*

. . .

And *il babbo* danced with Lorenzo, lurching heavily, breathing lusciously, offering him sops of good counsel: he must clean out old barrels with much sulphur before he put in his vintage. “And do not listen to the women, *figlio mio*, for they have no brains. It is I, Borello, who am the brains of my family.” And he let go of Laurie, to demonstrate with double fists exactly where these brains were kept. . . . But he slipped and fell among the guitars and the concertinas, and there was loud rubicund laughter. . . . His wife stood there shaking, her hands on her hips, the sweat streaming down her fat good-natured face, for she was so glad, so glad that her daughter could be visited now.

(2)

Everyone had gone home at last, and Modesta was briskly clearing away the more riotous marks of the feast. Presently she rescued the precious marriage lines from where once more they had been carelessly flung into jeopardy, under the table.

"Better give them here, Modesta. I'll look after them."

But Modesta, with a flourish, said Thank you, no, Lorenzo was very kind, but what with one thing and what with another—or the equivalent idiom in Italian—she preferred to guard her marriage lines herself. "But we will have a *fiesta* every year, like this one, to celebrate the anniversary, shall we not, Lorenzo? And next time *il bambino* can be present."

Laurie nodded, reflecting that Italian *bambinos* did not need much sleep, and that rum cake probably agreed with them. Then he caught Modesta as she passed, and pulled her into his arms.

"We shall be a family now. We can't travel about. We must settle down to live here always."

And she nodded contentedly. "It does not matter. I have seen the world, I."

He marvelled at her power of acceptance. "Tell

me, did you never wonder why I hid our marriage lines?"

"No," answered Modesta, sweetly and calmly. "It is well known that all foreigners are mad." And she disentangled herself from his embrace and went on tidying up.

"And yet," Laurie went on, musing over the evening's doings and happenings, "the funny part of it is that not one of them noticed that it wasn't the anniversary at all. We were married nearly two months earlier, in June. Did you realise that, Modesta?"

Modesta replied that, yes, she had remembered exactly when they were married.

"Then why didn't you contradict me, you comic little ruffian?"

She indicated, by a twitch of the shoulder, a slither of acquiescence down her small slim body, a flicker of the eyelids, that it was not her place nor her wish to contradict Lorenzo. In all moral and spiritual matters he was right. His knowledge was of the very first rank. And if he chose to say that the anniversary of their June wedding was in September, well then . . . it was in September.

But a few seconds later his submissive young wife had turned on him like a small wild cat, spattering him with fury and reproaches because, in a spasm of compunction at seeing her endeavours to create order,

he had himself lifted the smeared and dripping bowl of *insalata*, and had set it down on the table too close to her pile of clean washing not yet ironed. This was *her* realm . . . and men were clumsy, men were animals, men were interfering and foolish and without thought. . . .

Laurie allowed her a minute's latitude in which to embroider on this theme; and then he sent her firmly up to bed. She was tired out, and there was plenty of work to be done to-morrow. The grape-gathering was not yet finished, and during the night he would have to disturb her every hour or so, rising from her side to go out and stir the fermenting wine in the vat.

Still scolding, Modesta pattered up the outside staircase which leant against the house, the only way into their bedroom. Laurie, watching her, reflected that the winter would be stormy, and Modesta was bearing a child; so that though a wife must not be pampered, yet perhaps it would be best if now he had the stairway roofed and walled. Yes, because, after all, now they were going to remain here.

A NOTE ON THE TYPE IN WHICH THIS BOOK IS SET

This book is composed on the Linotype in Bodoni, so-called after its designer, Giambattista Bodoni (1740-1813) a celebrated Italian scholar and printer. Bodoni planned his type especially for use on the more smoothly finished papers that came into vogue late in the eighteenth century and drew his letters with a mechanical regularity that is readily apparent on comparison with the less formal old style. Other characteristics that will be noted are the square serifs without fillet and the marked contrast between the light and heavy strokes.



SET UP, ELECTROTYPED, PRINTED
AND BOUND BY H. WOLFF
ESTATE, NEW YORK · PAPER
MADE BY TICONDEROGA
PULP & PAPER CO.,
TICONDEROGA, N. Y.

